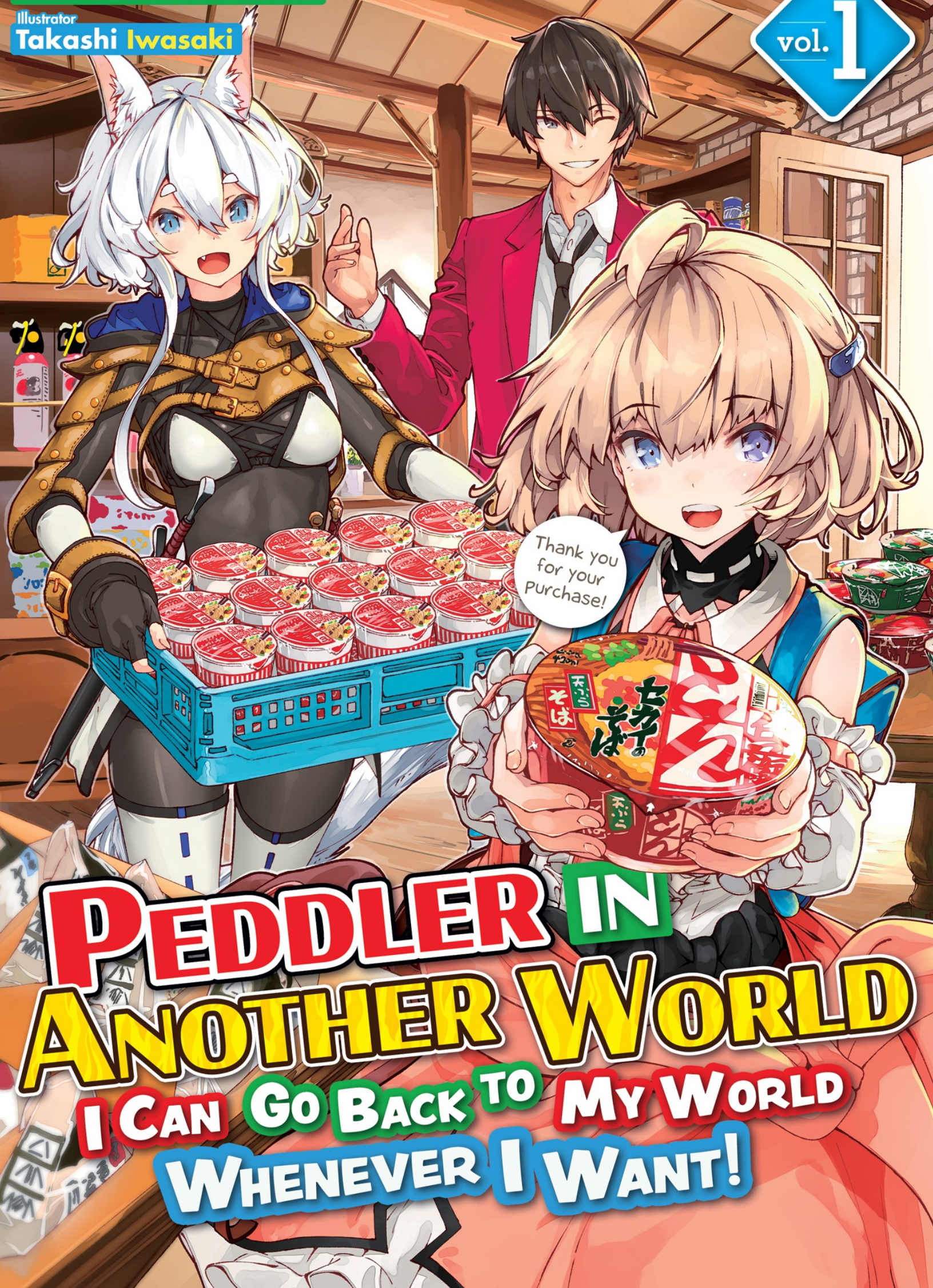


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vol. **1**



PEDDLER IN ANOTHER WORLD

**I CAN GO BACK TO MY WORLD
WHENEVER I WANT!**



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Thank you
for your
purchase!

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Chapter One: Hello, Brand New World!

“So, uh, this is a thing, huh?”

At that precise moment in time, I was standing in the middle of a forest, peering at the outline of a town up ahead that looked like it was straight out of a fantasy movie. I noticed there were two moons shining brightly in the sky above me.

“And...” I said, turning around to look back at where I’d just come from. “That’s the room with grandma’s memorial altar in it.”

I took a deep breath and tried to compose myself.

“Calm down. Calm down, Amata Shiro,” I told myself. “First things first, let’s attempt to get a handle on the situation.”

This was my first day staying in the house my late grandma had left to me in her will. I’d moved in after quitting my job at a company with, quite frankly, a toxic work environment around the end of the previous month. After cleaning the whole place from top to bottom, and once the moving company had dropped off my boxes and boxes of stuff, I’d set about finding new homes for my belongings. It was then that I’d opened the closet in the Japanese-style room where my grandma’s memorial altar had been placed (it was already there when I moved in), and...

“I found myself in a fantasy world,” I summed up to myself. “Huh. This makes zero sense. What kind of crazy supernatural phenomenon is this? I’m probably just overtired.”

I went back to the Japanese-style room, closed the closet door, and headed to the kitchen to make myself a strong cup of coffee. About ten minutes later, I headed back to the other room and went over to the closet again.

“Aaand...” I said, opening the closet door. “It’s still there.”

Well, that proved I wasn’t hallucinating. The two moons in the sky shone brightly, their roundness suggesting that tonight was their equivalent of a “full

moon.” I closed the closet door once again and went over to the memorial altar to burn some incense.

“Hey grandma, did you know about this?”

Though, of course, she didn’t answer. The portrait of her throwing peace signs just smiled at me. She’d gone missing seven years ago, and last month, the authorities had finally declared her dead. Her sudden disappearance had initially been very hard on everyone, but by this time, our family had pretty much come to terms with the fact she was gone.

“Shiro...” she’d once said to me. “One day, grandma will tell you her secret, all right?”

But despite saying that, she’d never shared her secret with me. And then she’d disappeared, leaving behind nothing but that picture of her throwing peace signs at the camera.

“I wonder if *this* is what she wanted to tell me about.”

I was reminiscing about grandma when...

“Hm? Is that...” I said, noticing an envelope poking out of a gap in the memorial altar. “A letter?”

I reached for it, and as I pulled it out, I saw that it had the words “To my family” written on it.

“Wait...” I said, realization washing over me. “Did grandma write this?!” I broke the seal and took out the letter inside. “She did! This is her handwriting! Let’s see here...”

Her letter started with a question. *What happens if you follow this path?*

I scanned the contents of the letter, and a little farther down, one particular section jumped out at me.

I have been hiding something from you all. I am actually a witch. Eighty years ago, I left my own world of Ruffaltio and came to Japan. I apologize for keeping this from you until now.

I looked up from the letter and took a deep breath.

“Grandma...” I breathed. “What’s with the sudden info dump?”

If I’d read this letter *before* opening the closet, I would’ve thought my grandma had finally lost her marbles, but given my recent discovery, I couldn’t *not* believe her.

“Maybe grandma’s still alive in her home world...” I wondered aloud, before immediately suppressing that faint glimmer of hope. “Nah. As if, ha ha. That’s impossible, of course.”

Seven years ago, she’d already been so frail that she could barely walk and she’d had a tendency to shiver even when she wasn’t actually cold. At the time, I was still in high school, and even back then, I’d already come to terms with the fact that she probably didn’t have long to live.

“I wonder if she died back in her home world...”

Either way, she wasn’t here anymore. My vision started going blurry, and I quickly closed my eyes to stop the tears from coming.

“Now’s not the time to get all depressed about it,” I chastised myself. “I should keep reading.”

I pulled myself together and read the rest of the letter, which could be summarized in six bullet points:

- The closet led to a world named Ruffaltio.
- While this other world wasn’t as technologically advanced as Earth, mysterious powers such as magic and something known simply as “skills” were common there.
- Dangerous monsters unlike anything on Earth could also be found there.
- There were a lot of different species that could communicate with humans as well as with one another.
- Grandma had put a magic ring that would allow me to understand the language of this other world in the envelope, and she’d advised me to put it on.
- She’d also hidden two books from this other world behind the altar, which I’d be able to read once I put on the ring.

That was it. That was all there was. She concluded her letter with the following statement: *Don't hesitate. Once you are there, you will understand everything.*

"Grandma..." I said quietly.

Like she'd said in her letter, there was a golden ring in the envelope, and as I looked closely at it, I noticed it was gleaming ever so slightly. I then reached behind the altar.

"Books, huh?"

There were indeed two books that had been placed behind grandma's memorial altar, but a cursory glance at them was enough to tell me they were written in a language unknown to me. I couldn't even decipher the titles, let alone the actual contents of the books. Though, if what was written in grandma's letter was accurate, if I put the ring on, the incomprehensible language wouldn't be so much of a mystery anymore and I should be able to read what they said. So I put the ring on the index finger of my left hand and...

"'The Book of Equivalent Exchange' and the...'The Book of Inventory'?" I read aloud.

I really *was* able to read the titles! *The Book of Equivalent Exchange* was about thirty pages long, while *The Book of Inventory* was only about a dozen. Even though I could now read the language the books were written in, the contents went pretty much straight over my head—though once I was done reading the first of the books, a voice inside my head said, "You have obtained the skill of 'Equivalent Exchange.'"

"Wh-Who's there?!" I cried.

I peered around the room, but the only things in it were the memorial altar and the photo of grandma throwing peace signs. What *was* that I'd just heard? It was super freaky!

"Hm..." I said, pondering what had just happened. "I don't really get it, but it sounds like I just got an 'Equivalent Exchange' skill, whatever *that* means. It kinda sounds like something straight out of a light novel or a game..."

Next, I read *The Book of Inventory*.

“You have obtained the skill of ‘Inventory,’” the voice said again.

“Seems like every time I obtain a skill, I hear that voice,” I surmised.

A ring that allowed the wearer to understand the language of the other world, a skill called “Equivalent Exchange,” and a skill called “Inventory,” huh? Now that I’d obtained all of these, what was I supposed to do next? To be honest, after quitting my job, I was free to do what I liked. On top of that, I’d taken the company to court and finally managed to get them to pay me for all the overtime I’d worked, as well as compensation for the living hell my former boss had put me through, which meant my savings had almost doubled. I’d been thoroughly exploited by that awful company, to the extent that it had taken a serious toll on my health, and I had no intention of looking for another job until I’d received every last bit of unemployment insurance money due to me. That meant I could take it easy and lead a nice, quiet life in the slow lane for a little while. Or well, that had been the plan right up until I’d learned my closet was a gateway to another world.

I recalled the last line of grandma’s letter: *Don’t hesitate. Once you are there, you will understand everything.*

I crossed my arms and muttered, “So what do I do now?”



“Hm, should I go over there or not?” I wondered aloud.

I imagined myself telling people about my discovery. *Oh, by the way, my closet leads to another world.* Yeah, there was no way anyone would believe me. And in the highly unlikely event that someone *did*, my grandma’s house would probably get seized by the government, or the USA, or maybe even the UN. After all, if my house really did lead to another world, and assuming that this other world was roughly the same size as the Earth, it would mean the natural resources of a whole planet were accessible from right here in this house. It would undoubtedly be commandeered by the authorities for the good of the country, perhaps even the world. All of this meant if I ever wanted to tell anyone about this, I’d have to make sure it was someone I could trust one hundred percent. In light of that, I only had one option.

“Guess I’m gonna have to keep all this to myself for now.”

That led me to my current dilemma: Should I go to this other world or not? In the pro column, I had more free time than I knew what to do with, I would have access to the natural resources of an entire world, and perhaps most importantly, in her letter, grandma had written: *Don't hesitate. Once you are there, you will understand everything.* Well, that sounded pretty conclusive to me.

"I guess I really should go, then," I said. "After all, grandma always used to say I should travel more."

I nodded, my mind made up. I would visit the world of Ruffaltio.



The next day came, and after making a trip to the nearest home center to buy some outdoor gear, I stood in front of the closet door. Grandma had said in her letter that there were monsters in the other world, so I'd also bought a survival knife, just in case. I was now ready for whatever lay beyond this door.

"See you later, grandma," I said, putting my hands together in front of the memorial altar.

After slipping on the ring grandma had left for me in the envelope with her letter, I opened the sliding door of the closet and stared out at the landscape beyond. One more step and I would be in another world. I crossed the threshold and found myself standing in the middle of a forest. As a test, I closed the door behind me and watched it slowly disappear—then I wished for it to appear again, which it promptly did, just like grandma had said it would in her letter. According to her, the closet door was *always* behind me, even if I couldn't see it, which meant I was basically free to cross between the two worlds whenever I wanted. Not gonna lie, grandma's closet was pretty amazing.

"Well, time for an adventure!"

Brimming with enthusiasm, I decided to head for the town I could see on the other side of the forest.

Chapter Two: Town in Another World

The town was roughly five hundred meters from the edge of the forest and it wasn't surrounded by any walls or anything, so even a non-resident like me could just waltz straight in without any issue.

"Wow, what a peaceful little town," I remarked.

The streets were lined with brick houses, and as I strolled along, I crossed paths with what I could only assume were some of the town's inhabitants from time to time, all of them looking me up and down and eyeing my outdoor gear curiously. I tentatively greeted one of them, who greeted me back. *Ooh*, I thought. *Seems like the ring works and I really am able to talk to them.*

Just as I was thinking how exciting this discovery was, my stomach suddenly started growling. It probably shouldn't have come as a surprise since I'd ended up right in front of a food stall full of delicious-looking meat skewers.

"Hey there, sonny! Wanna try one of my meat skewers?" the middle-aged stall owner asked me. "They're nice and cheap."

A sizzling sound could be heard as the meat cooked over a charcoal fire. The smell was absolutely mouthwatering. *Those would go really well with a beer*, I thought.

"What kind of meat is it?" I asked.

"Jackalope. And only three copper coins apiece. Whaddaya say? Sounds like a pretty good deal, right?"

"Sure does, but, uh..." I said hesitantly. "I don't have any money on me right now. Sorry."

"Well, why didn't ya say that right away?" the man said, not even attempting to hide his displeasure.

Is that really the kind of attitude a vendor should have? I thought, but I decided not to say anything and trotted away.

“Damn!” I cursed. “If I only had some money on me, I could’ve eaten one of those skewers.”

I plunged a hand into my pants pocket and fished out the contents. I had 4,200 yen on me in total, which was the change I’d gotten after a trip to the convenience store shortly before coming here. With that, I could’ve bought myself something extravagant for lunch in my own world, but in this world, I couldn’t even buy a single meat skewer.

I sighed. “Jackalope meat, huh? If only I could buy some with my yen!”

And then it happened. The money in my hand vanished and was replaced by some weird-looking coins.

“Wh-What the hell?!” I cried.

I had a grand total of 42 coins made out of some sort of brown metal in the palm of my hand.

“Where’d my money...” I started before it hit me. “Ah! Maybe this is that ‘Equivalent Exchange’ skill thing?”

I’d lost my 4,200 yen and ended up with 42 brown coins instead. I rushed back to the food stall.

“Hm? Ah, you’re the lad from earlier,” the stall owner said. “Did ya bring money with ya this time?”

“Hey, quick question, pops,” I said to him. “You mentioned copper coins earlier. Is that what these things are?”

I showed him the coins that had appeared in my hand. He tilted his head to one side in confusion.

“Well, ain’t it obvious that’s what they...” he started before something clicked in his head. “Ah, I get it now! I shoulda guessed from lookin’ at yer clothes. You’re a foreigner! *That’s* why ya don’t know nothin’ about the currency here.” He nodded and added, “Yup. Those are copper coins all right.”

I immediately dropped to my knees. “Hell yeaah!” I yelled triumphantly. “Pops! Give me two...” I paused and changed my mind. “No, *three* of those skewers!”

“Sure thing, sonny,” the vendor said. “Since ya came all the way to our li’l town, I’ll give ’em to ya for eight copper coins.”

“Thanks! Here you go,” I said as I handed him the eight coins.

“Thankin’ ya,” he said as he passed me the meat skewers. “Eat ’em while they’re hot, y’hear?”

“I’m digging in now!”

My first meal in another world. The skewers weren’t seasoned at all. *It’s a good thing I didn’t get that beer*, I thought as I chewed on the bland meat.



After I was done eating, I decided to experiment a little with my “Equivalent Exchange” skill.

“So I can transform my yen into the currency of this world, but can I turn these so-called ‘copper coins’ back into yen?” I wondered aloud.

How was I even able to use this skill in the first place? I’d unconsciously activated it earlier, but there *had* to be some conditions you had to meet in order for it to work, surely? I placed the coins in the palm of my hand and silently wished for them to turn into yen.

I looked down at my hand. “Whoa! It worked!”

Believe it or not, instead of the 34 coins I’d had before, I found myself holding 3,400 yen! Or to be more precise, I had three 1,000-yen bills and four 100-yen coins in my hand. So in summary:

Japanese yen → This world’s currency.

This world’s currency → Japanese yen.

Conclusion: My “Equivalent Exchange” skill allowed me to convert money into the currency of either world.

Wait, what the hell? Isn’t this skill a little broken? I thought. I took a 10,000-yen bill out of my wallet and tried using my skill again. It promptly disappeared

and was replaced by a single silver coin.

“Huh. It’s not the same color as the ones from earlier,” I mused. “Is it a silver coin?”

I headed back over to the food stall again.

“Hey, pops. Can I pay using this?” I said, showing him the silver coin.

“Ya ain’t got any more copper coins, sonny? I ain’t got change for a silver coin,” he answered with a scowl.

So it really *was* a silver coin. Which meant:

1 copper coin → 100 yen.

1 silver coin → 10,000 yen.

I could use my skill to turn my yen into the currency of this world.

Thinking about it, that also meant if I earned money here, I could transform it into yen as well. *What the hell? That’s so cool*, I thought.

“I should probably turn all the money I have on me into this world’s currency for now,” I thought aloud.

So I did just that. I ended up with two silver coins and 34 copper coins. My 50-yen and 1-yen coins stayed the same though, which suggested that in this country (maybe even in this whole world), copper coins were the lowest denomination. At any rate, judging by the food vendor’s reaction earlier, I probably had more than enough money on me to stroll about town.

“Well, I’ve got myself some money now, so let’s go for a wander, shall we?” I said to myself.

And so, I continued my amble around town with the coins rattling in my pockets as I walked. The little town looked like it was surrounded by fields, and beyond that, a forest. A small stream ran through the fields, and I noticed some people doing their laundry in it.

“Is that what people call ‘life in the slow lane’?” I muttered to myself.

After walking a little way, I stumbled upon a wide street and what appeared to be a marketplace. This was probably the place that saw the most action in this tiny little town. Both sides of the street were lined with food carts and all kinds of stalls, and from time to time, passersby would stop to see what wares were on offer.

“Whoa,” I said in awe. “This place looks like it’s straight out of a fantasy novel.”

I spotted a man in heavy armor (an adventurer, perhaps?), and a little way past him stood a lady in a robe who had a crooked staff in her hand. There was even a girl with cat ears! Now that’s what I call fantasy! My excitement level immediately skyrocketed at the sight of them, and I wanted to go over and talk to them so bad—*especially* the cute cat-eared girl—but there was a slight issue.

“My clothes really stand out here, don’t they?” I reflected.

It seemed that outdoorsy clothes, while being considered rather fashionable in Japan, weren’t exactly to people’s tastes here. Everyone kept casting odd looks in my direction.

“Well, then,” I said. “First things first, I should probably buy myself some new clothes.”

To do that, however, I’d need to find a clothes store. Maybe one of the stalls around here had what I was looking for...

As I was peering around, I suddenly heard a voice behind me. “Excuse me...” the high-pitched voice said. “Would you like to buy some flowers?”

I turned around and saw a little girl who looked to be no more than ten years old. Her eyes were two different colors (which I think is called heterochromia, right?), and she wore a brightly colored sash around her waist. She was holding a flower basket in her hands.

“Hm? Were you talking to me?” I asked her.

“Um, f-flowers...” she repeated timidly. “Would you like...”—she paused again before mustering up the courage to finish her sentence—“...some flowers?”

Chapter Three: The Little Flower Girl

“Would you like some flowers?” she said again.

There were all kinds of brightly colored flowers in the little girl’s basket, and judging by the sheer quantity she had in there, it looked as if she was having trouble finding anyone who wanted to buy one.

“Ah, you’re selling flowers, are you?” I asked, crouching down so I was at her eye level. She nodded. “Hm, maybe I should get one, then. How much are they?”

The girl’s eyes widened in disbelief. Judging by her expression, she clearly hadn’t expected me to answer in the affirmative. “Three, um...” she said, then changed her mind. “T-Two copper coins for one,” she concluded, before adding, “Please.”

“Two copper coins, huh?” I repeated.

“Ah, i-is...” she stuttered. “Is that too expensive? Wh-What about just one?” she suggested, seemingly getting more and more panicky the longer she talked to me. Maybe she was anxious because I was an adult.

“All right,” I said. “I’ll take the yellow one. Three copper coins, right?”

“Th-Three copper coins?” she said, looking surprised.

“That’s the price you had in mind at first, right?” I explained. “Then that’s what I’ll pay.”

“Are you...” she started, before pausing and trying again. “Are you sure?” Her face was fully flushed by this point. Then she seemed to remember to say something she’d forgotten. “Sir.”

The way she was quivering in fear reminded me of a small animal. Plus, she was obviously struggling with her manners. It was very cute.

“Yes, I’m sure,” I said. “Though if you think that’s too much, maybe you can throw in some information too, if that’s all right. I’d like to ask you a few

things.”

“Me?” she asked, blinking.

“Yes, you,” I said, laughing. The girl smiled slightly.

“Okay. What do you want to know?” she asked, then remembered her manners. “Sir.”

I took the flower I’d asked for out of her basket and handed her three copper coins before proceeding with my questions. “Hm, there’re a lot of things I wanna ask,” I said. “Let’s start with something easy. Could you tell me your name?”

“It’s Aina,” she said, followed by the customary “Sir.”

I laughed. “You can drop the ‘sir.’ There’s no need to be so polite. Besides, it’s starting to make me feel a little nervous,” I said, still chuckling.

“All right...” Aina said, her expression softening ever so slightly. I wondered if she was starting to feel a little more relaxed in my presence.

“My name is Amata Shiro,” I said, then thought about it for a second. “Or maybe I should say ‘Shiro Amata’ here? Well, either way, just call me Shiro, all right? It’s nice to meet you, Aina.”

I held out my right hand, which Aina stared at for a while, before finally shaking it.

“Nice to meet you, Mister Shiro.”

“Okay, this next question is going to be a bit of a *weird* one, but...” I said tentatively. “What’s the name of this town?”

She looked puzzled. “The name of this town?”

“Yeah. As you can probably tell by my clothes, I’m not from around here. I’ve just arrived in town and there’s a bunch of stuff I don’t know,” I told her. “So I was hoping you could maybe tell me a little about this place and its customs.”

“Oh, so that’s how it is!” the little girl said. “Okay, lemme see...”

Thanks to Aina, I was able to learn lots of new things about this world. I found out that this little town was called Ninoritch, and it was situated in the Giruam

Kingdom, relatively close to the border. She also told me about how the currency of the country worked. As I understood it, there were three types of coin here: copper, silver, and gold. One silver coin was equal to a hundred copper coins, and a hundred silver coins in turn made one gold coin. The townsfolk apparently earned—on average—about eight silver coins a month, and the vast majority didn't have any gold coins to their name. If my earlier calculations were correct, a gold coin was the equivalent of one million yen, meaning having one of those would be the same as walking around with a roll of banknotes in your pocket. So it was really no surprise that most people didn't carry that much money around on a daily basis.

"So the average monthly salary is eight silver coins, huh? Ah, wait a minute," I said, thinking of something else I wanted to know. "How many days are in a month here?"

"Thirty days," Aina answered. "Is it different where you're from?"

In this world, a year was split into twelve months and each one had exactly thirty days—though there were also two more days tacked on right at the end of the year, as well as two more where the people paid their respects to the dead, and these additional days weren't officially part of any month. Altogether, that brought the total number of days in a year in this world to 364. *Oof, so close!* I thought. *It's only one day off from our world!*

I'd also been right about this stall-filled part of town: it really was a marketplace. Unlike marketplaces in my own world, though, as long as you notified the town hall of your activities, absolutely anyone could do business here, even a child like Aina.

"Hm, I see. So if I go register at the town hall, even I can open a shop here?" I asked.

"Yeah, I think so," Aina said.

"Interesting," I said, pondering this. "Well, that's some pretty good news!"

That meant I could work as a merchant in this world. Maybe bringing products in from Japan and selling them over here could be a good way of making some easy money. I'd have to ask Aina for more details. But first...

“Hey, Aina. Can I buy some more flowers?”

“Huh?” she said, looking surprised by my request.

“About...” I said, before pausing to consider how many I should buy. “About ten more should be enough.”

Aina was speechless. *Hey, Aina, stop looking at me like I’ve grown a second head!* I thought. She opened and closed her mouth a few times before managing to find some words.

“Mister Shiro...” she said slowly, “you’re joking, right?”

“Of course not,” I assured her. “I want to put some flowers in my room for decoration, and I can’t have just the one, can I? It’d look so lonely.”

Grandma used to love flowers. I intended to put them on the memorial altar, and I was sure she’d be much happier having Aina’s flowers on there than ones from the local florist’s. As a look of comprehension appeared on Aina’s face, I took ten flowers out of her basket. A single flower cost three copper coins, which meant I owed her 30 coins.

“Here you go,” I said. “30 copper coins.”

The coins made a clinking noise as I handed them to her.

“That’s so much money...” she said in amazement, and her eyes immediately started welling up with tears.



It wasn't a huge amount of money to me, but to a child like Aina, who was forced to work despite her young age, 30 copper coins (which was 3,000 yen, remember) must've seemed like a massive sum. After all, back when I was a kid, I'd also thought anything above 1,000 yen was a pretty substantial amount of money.

"Thank you, Mister Shiro," she said, looking genuinely grateful.

"I told you, it's no big deal," I insisted. "To be honest, *I* should be the one thanking *you* for these beautiful flowers."

Aina giggled. "I'm glad you find them beautiful."

She gave me a little smile as tears ran down her face.

"Oh, by the way," I said. "Could you tell me where this town hall is? And what it is I have to do there so that I can open up a shop?"

She wiped her cheeks and her smile got a little brighter. "Sure!"

"Thanks. Well, then," I said. "Where do I have to go?"

"I'll take you there," the little girl said enthusiastically. "It's this way!"

"Oh, for real?" I hadn't expected her to offer to walk me there.

"Follow me!"

She hopped off in the direction of the town hall and beckoned me to follow her, so I did.



"Here's the town hall!"

The town hall turned out to be a two-story brick building right in the middle of town, and according to Aina, you could just walk on in there even if you weren't a resident. I followed her inside and started going through the process of getting permission to open up a shop. It was all relatively simple. First, I had to write my name on a form, and state how long I intended on doing business in the town. Then, I just had to inform them whether I was planning to work as a roaming street peddler, or if I wanted an assigned spot in the marketplace, or if I wanted a proper brick-and-mortar store. Street peddling would cost me three

copper coins a day, whereas an assigned spot would cost me 10. If I wanted a proper store in the town, though, things were a bit different. The only option there was to sign a ten-day contract, which required a payment of three silver coins.

I decided to go for the “assigned spot in the marketplace” option, and for the time being, I set my period of trade as five days. I filled out the application form accordingly. It would cost me 50 copper coins for five days, which worked out as 1,000 yen per day. Compared to the price of a spot at one of the flea markets in Tokyo—about 3,000 yen a day—it was really cheap.

According to the town hall employee I spoke to, the mayor was the one who’d come up with the idea. As Ninoritch was situated in a relatively remote corner of the kingdom, the mayor had hoped that making rental costs cheaper here than everywhere else would attract merchants and tourists, and in turn, help the town to grow. On top of that, the area was patrolled regularly in order to ensure a safe environment for all. If you asked me, this mayor sounded like a pretty smart cookie.

“All right, done. Have I missed anything?” I asked the town hall official as I handed her the completed form.

Thanks to grandma’s ring, I was even able to write in the language of this world. How cool is that?

“Mr. Shiro Amata,” she read aloud. “You have applied for an assigned spot in the marketplace for a period of five days. Is that correct?”

“Yes, that’s right,” I confirmed. “Though I might ask for an extension if I manage to turn a profit.”

“Oh, that *is* good news!” she said delightedly. “After all, if your business does well, it will also benefit our little town. I pray for your success. Well, then. Everything seems to be in order. Good luck!”

“Thank you so much for your help,” I said.

And just like that, my shop was registered. It’d only taken roughly fifteen minutes. *All right! Now I just need to decide what I’m going to sell,* I thought.

I decided to head back to the marketplace for the time being.



Aina and I were back where we'd started. The process had gone really smoothly, and starting tomorrow, I would be able to set up my shop! Or well, my stall, I should say. So what I needed to do next was...

"Time for a spot of market research, I think."

To put it simply: I needed to find out what would appeal to the people of this town, and what was already on the market.

"What are you going to sell, Mister Shiro?" Aina asked. She seemed very curious about what a traveler like me would have to sell.

I laughed. "I filled out all that paperwork, but I'm not really sure what I want to sell yet." I thought for a moment. "Oh, hey! Maybe you can help me! Do you know what kind of things sell well around here?"

"Um..." she said, pondering this. "A lot of 'ad-vent-you-rers' come through here, so stuff for ad-vent-you-rers sells pretty well, I think."

It was true that there were quite a lot of people dressed like anime and game characters at the market. I guessed these must be the adventurers Aina was talking about. I figured most of the other vendors probably targeted them as well.

"Hm. Adventurers, you say..." I said, mulling this over.

"Yeah, ad-vent-you-rers! There are lots of monsters in the forest, and my mama told me all the ad-vent-you-rers come here to get, um..."—she paused and thought about it—"loot, I think?"

Huh? The forest? Wasn't that where I'd come from? There were *monsters* in there?! Thank goodness I hadn't encountered any on my way here.

"Stuff for adventurers, huh?" I mused.

"Yep, stuff for ad-vent-you-rers!" the little girl said enthusiastically, before suddenly becoming more circumspect. "That's why not a lot of people buy my flowers..." Her face scrunched up.

"Oh, I see..." I said.

“But you bought so many flowers from me today!” she said, perking up. “I was really happy! I’m really glad I met you, Mister Shiro!”

“Aw, stop it. You’re gonna make me blush,” I teased. “Anyway, back to the matter at hand. Stuff for adventurers, you say?”

I started strolling around the market to see what the other vendors were selling. At one stall, there were ropes, knives, and grindstones; at the next, lanterns and flint; cloaks and sleeping bags; pots and wooden utensils... Aina had been right. Most of the wares were definitely marketed toward adventurers. It wasn’t surprising her flowers didn’t sell well in this area.

“Seems like most people do sell stuff for adventurers here, don’t they?” I concluded.

“Right? Told you so,” she said, giggling proudly.

It appeared she was going to stick around until I was done exploring the market.

“Ah, look, Mister Shiro!” she said excitedly. “That store sells preserved food.”

Well, in a way, I was glad she was here to guide me, because I had no idea about what kinds of things went on here. What a selfless child she was. She’d make someone a good wife one day.

“And here you have oil for lanterns. And here they sell cooking pots!” she continued. “And that shop sells...”

By the time we’d done a full tour of the market, Aina and I had become fast friends. She’d even started holding my hand at some point. *Hopefully, I’ll find myself a wife and have a cute little daughter of my own in the near future,* I silently wished.

“So did you decide what you’re going to sell, Mister Shiro?” Aina asked, looking up at me with a huge smile on her face as I stood there with my arms crossed, lost in thought. Her demeanor was completely different from when we’d first met. She really had gotten more comfortable around me, hadn’t she?

“Yep, I’ve decided,” I declared.

“Really?!” she said, her face lighting up. “What will you sell? Tell me, tell me!”

“I’m going to sell...”

Once I’d explained to her what kind of product I’d be bringing across from Japan to sell here, Aina tilted her head to one side, her face a picture of confusion, and asked, “What’s *that*?”

Chapter Four: Let's Get Down to Business

A day had passed since I'd registered my "shop" (as I was now going to refer to it), and after going back to Japan to get some stock, I was back in the marketplace. It was still pretty early, and there weren't many people around.

"All righty. Let's get everything set up."

Not that it was going to take me very long to get my little patch ready for trading, because my plan was to spread a picnic blanket out on the ground and arrange my goods on top of it. The spot I'd been assigned was about six tatami mats in size, which was roughly double the area you'd get in a flea market in Tokyo. I started taking my goods out of my backpack and placing the different-sized boxes on the blanket.

"Looking good!" I said, pleased with my little display. "Guess I'm ready to get this show on the road."

"Ah! Mister Shiro!" called a voice from the other side of the market almost as soon as I'd finished setting up. I looked up and saw Aina running over to me.

"Good morning, Mister Shiro!"

"Morning, Aina," I replied. "Selling flowers again today?"

"Yup! I woke up *super* early this morning to pick them!" she said, showing me her basket that was filled to the brim with fresh flowers. From the looks of how many she had, she must have gotten up really, *really* early and spent hours gathering them.

"Wow, such pretty flowers!" I said. "I'm sure you'll sell a bunch today!"

"Yeah! I'm gonna sell lots of flowers to help mama!" she declared, seemingly in an attempt to psych herself up. She was so expressive today. Maybe she'd started viewing me as a friend. Not gonna lie, that thought made me pretty happy.

"Anyway, I have to go!" she said. "Bye-bye, Mister Shiro!"

“Yup, see you later,” I replied.

She waved at me before turning to the nearest person and asking, “Would you like some flowers?”

I hoped lots of people would buy her flowers today. If a little girl as cute as Aina were selling flowers on the street in Japan, she’d be completely sold out in minutes, of that I had no doubt.

“Would you...” she started, trying to catch people’s attention as she walked around the market. “Ah, excuse me! Um...”—and when she finally *did* get their attention—“Would you like some flowers?”

After a little while, I lost sight of her. What a good little girl she was. She was so young, yet she was already working hard to help out her mother. *Well, then!* I thought. *I need to do my best too!*

Little by little, people started filtering into the marketplace, and I spotted a few adventurers among the growing crowds.

“Hey, there. What are you selling?” said a young man—who was obviously an adventurer, judging by his outfit—as he approached.

He picked up one of the boxes I’d lined up on my picnic blanket and started inspecting it. I was in luck today! I’d managed to get my first customer of the day without even trying to attract his attention.

“This box...” he said as he turned it over in his hands. “It’s made of paper. Is it some sort of handicraft item?” The man seemed very intrigued by what I was selling.

“Oh, no, that’s actually...” I said, before realizing a demonstration would explain it better. I picked up one of the boxes, slid out the internal compartment, and pulled out one of the short, thin sticks that were inside. “This is called a match,” I told him. “You use it to get a fire started.”

Yes, matches were what I’d brought over from Japan to sell here. Aina had told me that to get a fire started in this world, the majority of people were forced to rub two bits of flint together, and the process was seriously tedious. There were other tools that used magic stones to produce fire, but they were very expensive, meaning regular families and the average adventurer couldn’t

afford them. On hearing this, I'd decided it'd be a good idea for me to sell matches, as they would prove useful to a lot of people here.

"Huh? A 'match'? Never heard of it, man," the young adventurer said. "How can such a tiny stick make fire?"

"Allow me to demonstrate," I said. "Watch. If you drag the head of the match against the rough side of this matchbox..." I struck the match I was holding on the part of the box I'd indicated and it instantly caught light. "There you go. Just like that. You can now use it to start a fire with ease!"

"Wh-Wh-What the hell *is* that thing?!" the young adventurer yelled when I'd finished my demonstration. He seemed genuinely flabbergasted by what he'd just witnessed. "What *was* that? How did you do it?" he asked enthusiastically.

He was yelling so loud, other passersby had stopped in their tracks and were watching from afar. If we'd been in Japan, everyone would've assumed I'd paid the guy to fake such an overzealous reaction.

"P-Please! Do it again!" he pleaded.

"Sure thing," I said, extinguishing the match and taking another from the box. "All right, watch *very* closely."

I did the same as before, dragging the head of the match across the rough side of the box, and just like the first one, it caught light instantly.

"Ooooooh!" This time, the rubbernecking crowd had witnessed my demonstration too, and the spectacle had created something of a commotion. Most of those watching on were adventurers, but there were also a few residents among them.

"What *was* that?!" one shouted.

"He just rubbed that stick against the box and fire appeared! But how? *How?*" another onlooker cried incredulously.

"How did you *do* that? Was it magic?!"

"You stupid or what? Who'd use magic just to light a fire? He clearly used that tool he's holding."

"You trying to pull one over on me? No item's capable of doing *that*!"

“I literally just saw it with my own eyes!”

And so it went on. My little matches seemed to have caused quite a stir.

“Hey, man, can anyone use this thing to light a fire?” the young adventurer from before asked me with a serious look on his face.

I nodded. “Of course! Here, take a closer look at it. You see how the tip of this little stick is red, yes? There’s actually a sort of chemical in it that makes it ignite when you drag it against the rough part of the box. Maybe you’d like to try it for yourself?”

“Wait, really?!” the wide-eyed young man exclaimed.

“Yes, really,” I said with a smile. “You’ll understand it better once you’ve tried doing it yourself. Come on, don’t be shy!”

“Wait a second...” the young man said, suddenly seeming a little hesitant. “You’re not planning on making me pay for this, are you?”

I laughed. “Of course not. Go on, give it a try.”

I handed him the match and the box. He held out the match, and—with his hands shaking—dragged it down the side of the matchbox.

“It worked!” he exclaimed joyously. “Even I can make fire this way!”

There were more gasps and appreciative noises that, by this point, sounded like they were bordering on cheers from the crowd.

“Does anyone else want to give it a try?” I asked the masses in front of me, and even before I’d finished my question, everyone around me started screaming “Me! Me!” at the same time.

I handed a match to each person who’d indicated they wanted to try it out, then got all of them to line up and told them to light their matches. At first, some had a bit of trouble getting the action right, while others broke their matches by being too forceful with them, but in the end, every single one of them had managed to get their match to light by their second or third attempt. All of them had experienced how convenient my little matches were.

“I never thought making fire could be so easy...” said the young adventurer, who was shaking with excitement. “This is amazing!”

I didn't miss a beat, immediately launching into my sales pitch. "It takes a really long time to get a fire started using flint, doesn't it?"

The adventurer nodded. "It really does!" he agreed. "I'm so bad at it too. I don't have the patience to wait for the fire to catch. But I'm not gonna use magic just to start a stupid fire. And don't even get me started on those crazily expensive and ridiculously cumbersome magic items *some* people sell!"

"I can see why those methods would be inconvenient, yes," I sympathized. "But with these matches, anyone can start a fire with no trouble at all! This small box contains forty of them, and the bigger one here has eight hundred inside. What do you say? I'm sure they'd be of great use to you in your future endeavors."

He hummed at this before offering his thoughts. "Well, it *is* true that these 'matches' of yours seem pretty useful, but..." he paused, seeming reluctant to commit to making a purchase. "How much are they? Such a convenient item must be pretty expensive, right?"

Finally! The question I'd been waiting for! It was easy to see from their expressions that everyone else in the crowd wanted to know the answer to this too. I brought my face closer to his, and asked, "How much do *you* think they are?"

By getting him to basically name his price, I'd find out exactly how much people in this world were willing to pay for matches.

"Well, for an item as convenient as this? Hm..." he pondered. "Oh, you said there were chemicals in the top part, right? That means it must be more expensive than flint."

While walking around the market the day before, I'd noted that the cheapest set of flints was 50 copper coins—5,000 yen—while the most expensive was two silver coins—an eye-watering 20,000 yen. Those kinds of prices were to be expected, though. After all, flint was a necessary item for townsfolk and adventurers alike, so naturally, the price would reflect that.

"Lemme think..." the adventurer said, mulling it over. He pointed to the smaller box of matches. "You said there were forty of these 'matches' in that little box, right?"

“Yes,” I confirmed.

“Then, at the very least, it’d be 80 copper coins a box,” he concluded.

Noted. So from an adventurer’s perspective, a single match was worth two copper coins. As if to verify that this figure was in the right ballpark, the other adventurers in the crowd nodded. On the flip side, the residents of the village—especially the housewives—looked rather gloomy. They probably wouldn’t be able to afford them at that price.

All right. Now I need to make an important decision, I thought. When it comes to business, there are basically two routes you can take. You can either sell good quality items for a lot of money, or cheap stuff to a lot of people. The former would net you a good chunk of money in just a single transaction, but the higher your prices, the less people are likely to buy your products. If you were to take the second option, you’d end up getting plenty of customers, but the profit margin on each transaction would be relatively small. Both approaches have their pros and cons, but as for the one I chose...

“Ah, too bad! You’re way off. This little box here costs five copper coins, and as for the big one...” I said, adding in a slight pause to emphasize the next part. “Well, I’d usually sell it for 55 copper coins, but to celebrate my shop’s grand opening, it’s on sale for the next three days, which means you can have one for 40 copper coins!”

Almost as soon as the final word of my infomercial-style sales pitch had passed my lips, the young adventurer yelled out, “I want one!”

I’d brought a hundred small boxes of matches and fifty big boxes with me, and I had been hoping I might at least sell half of them over the five-day period I’d leased this spot out for. However...

“Gimme one of those big boxes of ‘matches’!”

“I want a small one!”

“I want one of each! One of each!”



The matches I'd brought over from Japan were even more popular than I could've ever imagined. I'd picked them up at a price of 250 yen for twelve of the small boxes, while one of the big boxes had cost the same amount. And here they were, selling like hotcakes at well over ten times the price I'd paid for them!

I did warn my customers that the matches didn't like humidity or water, but even with these caveats, everyone was still eager to buy some. I only had a hundred and fifty boxes in total, so needless to say, I ran out of stock almost instantly, with a lot of people still waiting their turn.

"Ah, I'm really sorry, but I've completely run out," I said apologetically to those waiting.

"Impossible!" the middle-aged woman in front of me exclaimed, seemingly dumbfounded. "So soon?"

I could tell from her face that she was bitterly disappointed, so I flashed her a smile and said, "Rest assured, I will be back tomorrow with more matches. I'll give everyone who wasn't able to purchase what they wanted today a numbered ticket. Could you please form a line in front of me?"

"A numbered ticket? What's that?" the woman asked, tilting her head to one side.

Ah. I'd forgotten that wasn't a thing here. "It's a kind of document that gives you priority to buy something over people who don't have one. I'll hand them out to everyone who was waiting in line. If you bring it with you tomorrow, you'll get to make a purchase before the other customers."

All of the market-goers who were crowded around my stall oohed and aahed in amazement.

"Oh, and if you all tell me in advance how many boxes you plan on buying, I'll have that amount ready and waiting for you. Anyway, if you'll all please line up over *here*..."

I raised a hand to indicate where I wanted them all to stand and everyone did as I said. I asked each customer how many boxes they wanted, and jotted the number down on my notepad before tearing out a scrap of paper which would

serve as the numbered ticket for the next day and handing it to them. There were more than a hundred people lined up, some of whom had already bought matches before I'd sold out. I tore out page after page from my notepad and handed them to my customers, until finally, the last person in the line trotted off happily, clutching a numbered ticket.

"Phew. And it's not even noon. Here I was, thinking I'd need five days to get rid of all of my stock, and I sold out in an hour!"

I cracked open the canned coffee I'd brought with me and decided to take a little break. I glanced down at my notepad and saw the number five repeated again and again. I'd need to get at least enough matches to fill all of these orders by tomorrow.

"Man..." I said to myself. "Am I gonna be all right doing this all by myself?"

After all, I'd had more than a hundred customers just today, and I'd probably have even more tomorrow.

"Well, I can't back out now. Gotta work hard and make a bunch of money!"

I stretched briefly before setting about the business of cleaning up. I was just folding my picnic blanket up when I heard someone running over to me.

"Mister Shiro! You're done with your work?" It was Aina.

"Yeah. I ran out of matches, so I'm closing up for the day," I told her.

"Oh! I'm so glad you managed to sell lots and lots of things today!" she said, laughing.

"I'm glad too. How are you getting along, Aina?" I asked.

Aina hid her basket behind her back. "Oh, um..." she mumbled, looking ashamed. "The flowers aren't selling all that well..."

"Oh, I see," was all I could say to that. I could see that her eyes were glistening with tears.

"The flowers are so pretty..." she whispered. "Why doesn't anyone want them?"

"Aina..." I started.

“N-No, it’s nothing!” she said, shaking her head. She used her sleeve to wipe away her tears. “I’m going back to selling my flowers now.”

“Hold it right there!” I said, grabbing her hand just as she was about to leave.

“Mister Shiro?”

“Aina, there’s something I wanna talk to you about. Will you wait a moment and listen?”

“Something you wanna talk to me about?”

“Yup.”

“What is it?” she asked, looking up at me.

“Could you help me with my shop starting tomorrow?”

She hadn’t been expecting me to ask her to start working part-time at my shop, and she blinked a few times as she tried to get her head around it. After a few seconds, she found her voice again and squeaked a few noises that adequately summed up her disbelief.

“Is that...” she started, before stopping and trying again. “Really?! You’ll let *me* work at your shop?”

“Of course. Tomorrow’s going to be *super* busy. I’ll definitely struggle if I’m all by myself. It’ll be a huge help if I have you there with me. Oh, and I’ll pay you, of course, and—”

“I’ll do it!” she interrupted. “Please let me work at your shop, Mister Shiro!”

Her breathing was ragged and I could see from the look in her eye how serious she was about doing it.

“Thank you so much, Aina! I was really starting to wonder how I was going to manage all on my own tomorrow...”

“No, I’m the one who should be saying ‘thank you.’ Thank you so much!” she said as tears welled up in her eyes again—though this time, she didn’t wipe them away. “I try really hard every day to sell my flowers, but I’m really bad at it, so I never manage to sell anything...” She sobbed and teardrops started splashing onto the ground in front of her. “I’ve been struggling a lot! That’s why

I want to thank you, Mister Shiro! Thank you so, so much!”

She kept thanking me over and over as tears streamed down her face. *I’ll make sure to pay her extra well for her work*, I decided.

Chapter Five: Today's Profits Are...

As soon as I stepped through the closet door back to my own world, I decided to use my Equivalent Exchange skill to convert some of the six silver coins and 2,051 copper coins I had on me after the day's exploits.

"It's probably best if I keep some of it as change. Most people paid me in copper coins, so if I keep about 300 or so of those, I should be good."

I set aside 300 copper coins that I planned to use as change the following day.

"Now, for my Equivalent Exchange skill..." I announced. "Go!"

All of the coins disappeared and were replaced by twenty-three 10,000-yen bills and five 1,000-yen bills. I also got a single 100-yen coin. I did some quick math to work out what all of this meant.

Before I'd come up with the idea of setting up this business, I'd started out with 24,200 yen. The meat skewers had cost me 800 yen. And I'd bought those flowers from Aina for 3,300 yen. Registering my shop had set me back another 5,000 yen. And finally, there were the matches, which had cost me a total of 16,250 yen. After deducting all of the above, and adding the 300 copper coins I'd set aside—30,000 yen in this world's money—I finally arrived at my profit for my first day of business: 215,550 yen.

"You're kidding."

It was an obscene amount of money for one day's—no, one *hour's*—work. In fact, it was way higher than my monthly salary in my previous job! And I'd made all of it in just one hour...

"If I earn 200,000 yen working just one hour in a day, my monthly income would come to a cool three million. In a year, I'd have earned more than 36 million yen. Looks like I don't really need to get a new job after all, huh?"

I could live the semi-NEET lifestyle I'd always dreamed of! What an exhilarating thought!

“I might even be able to spend the rest of my days playing games and reading manga...”

Stop that, I told myself. *Get with the program*. I realized that, instead of daydreaming, I should probably have been focusing on getting things ready for the next day. With that in mind, I caught the bus to the nearest hardware store.

“Matches, matches, where are you, little matches?” I sang quietly to myself as I wandered down the aisles. “Ah, there you are!”

Once I’d found the matches, I tossed all the boxes they had on display into my shopping cart.

“Hm, ‘survival matches’? What are those?”

My eye had been drawn to a corner of the matches section boasting a type of match I’d never come across before. According to the description, these so-called “survival matches” were allegedly waterproof and wind-resistant.

“These look like they’d sell well among adventurers. Better grab ’em as well.”

My purchases came to 127,550 yen, which I paid for using the profits from that morning. To think I’d be spending 130,000 yen on matches of all things... Though, I knew I’d make it all back and then some the following day, so it wasn’t all that big a deal.

“Thank you!” I said to the cashier when I’d paid for my shopping. Though that’s when I ran into a huge problem. “That’s a lot of matches, huh?” I said to myself as I looked down at my shopping cart.

After buying up the shop’s entire stock of matches, I’d ended up with *a lot* of the little firestarters. How was I supposed to get all of them home? *Maybe I should call a cab*, I thought. But then, I had an idea.

“Wait a minute. If I can use the Equivalent Exchange skill I learned from that book, doesn’t that mean I can also use the ‘Inventory’ skill?”

I wheeled my shopping cart to the parking lot that was on the level above the store, and after looking left and right to make sure no one else was around, I let out a “Hmpf!” and wished for the contents of my cart to be stored away. And believe it or not, some sort of weird rift appeared in midair in front of my very

eyes!

“Hell yeah!” I yelled triumphantly.

I guessed this must be my “inventory.” I tossed all of my matches into the rift, which promptly disappeared as soon as I’d hurled the last box into it.

“Wow, it worked!” I said cheerily. “Now, let’s try taking them out again.”

I want to take out the matches, I wished silently. A list of all my stored items appeared in my mind’s eye.

Stored Items

Box of matches (S) x 600

Box of matches (L) x 200

Box of survival matches x 100

Naturally, all of my stored items were matches. My next wish was: *I want to take out one box of survival matches*. The rift instantly appeared in midair in front of me and I plunged my hand into it, whereupon it struck something hard, which turned out to be the box of survival matches.

“This is so cool. This Inventory skill is *insane*!”

Once I’d gotten the hang of it, it was pretty easy to use the skill, and by the time I’d stopped messing around with it, I was able to take boxes of matches out of the rift and put them back in again at will.

“I don’t need to worry about how I’m gonna transport this stuff around now! Isn’t this the greatest skill someone doing business in another world could ask for?”

The Equivalent Exchange skill and the Inventory skill. I had no doubt that these two skills would be the key to me earning an absolute ton of money.

“All righty. For now, I’m gonna keep selling matches for the next five days, but after that, I’ll need to start thinking a bit more seriously about my business plan. Wait for me, my millionaire life!”

I went home and decided to get an early night so I'd be ready for the following day.



People rose early in Ruffaltio. Why do I say that? Well, when I arrived there at seven the following morning...

"Good morning, Mister Shiro!"

...Aina was already waiting for me.

"Morning, Aina," I replied. "I'm surprised to see you here so early. Have you been waiting long?"

"N-No, I just got here," she stammered.

"Really?" I said, a note of doubt in my voice.

"Well, uh..." she said cautiously. "I did wait just a *little*..." A giggle escaped her lips. "Anyway, Mister Shiro..." she said, turning to point at my assigned spot in the marketplace. "You've got customers waiting."

And indeed I did. I hadn't even set up for the day yet, but there was already a long line in front of my "shop." Some of those waiting had numbered tickets in their hands, while plenty of others didn't. To put it into perspective just how many people were waiting for me to open my shop, I could've sworn the whole town was in that line.

"So many people..." I murmured.

"Let's work hard today, Mister Shiro!" Aina said enthusiastically as I just stood there with my jaw on the floor.

I had been planning on getting everything set up at a nice, leisurely pace, but there was no way I could do that now, given the situation I was faced with.

"Oh well, whatever," I said with a shrug. "Aina, go prepare for us to open."

"Right!"

I opened my rucksack and took out the picnic blanket. I could've used my Inventory skill to store the day's supplies, but I wanted to try and avoid using it in front of people as much as I could, because after all, I had no idea how

people felt about “skills” in this world. I’d decided it was best to err on the side of caution. I spread the picnic blanket out on the ground and started taking the matchboxes out of my rucksack. I could hear oohs and aahs from the crowd, and there was even the odd remark. “So that’s what everyone’s been talking about...” I heard one person say.

“Okay, Aina,” I said to her. “If I say ‘S,’ I’m talking about these little boxes here, and if I say ‘L,’ I mean these big ones. You got that?”

She nodded enthusiastically, a serious expression on her face.

“I’ll tell you how many of each size box the customers want, and you have to put those boxes in a paper bag and hand it to them. Can you do that?”

I took a stack of paper bags I’d bought at the hardware store out of my rucksack and gave them to Aina.

“Yeah!” Aina said. “I’ll do it!”

“All righty, then. If you have any questions, don’t hesitate to ask, okay? Now, let’s open, shall we?” I suggested.

“Yeah!” was her enthusiastic response.

“Sorry for the wait, everyone,” I said to the waiting crowd. “We are now open. Can the customers with numbered tickets please come forward?”

This is how I started my second day of business.

“Aina, three S, two L, please,” I called over to my helper.

“Okay!” Aina replied. “Here you go. Thank you for waiting,” she said as she handed the bag with the order in it to the customer.

“One S, one L!” was the next order.

“And...” Aina said, placing the matchboxes in a bag. “Here!”

“Five S, please!”

“Okay. Here you go!”

I took care of the payments while Aina was in charge of preparing the orders and handing them to the customers. There were a lot more customers than there had been the day before, but thanks to Aina helping out, everything went

much faster this time, and three hours later, I'd run out of matches to sell.

"I'm sorry, everyone, but we have no more matches at this time," I announced to the waiting masses.

There was a collective groan from the crowd. My second day as a peddler here, and once again, everything was sold out. Aina and I were absolutely exhausted after working nonstop for several hours to fulfill all the orders.

"Mister Shiro! We managed to sell all of them!" Aina said, smiling brightly in spite of how tired she was.

"Yup, and it's all thanks to you helping me. Okey dokey, let's take a look at today's profits." I started sorting through the impressive pile of coins I'd ended up with. "One, two, three, four..."

I'd sold 600 small boxes of matches (at five copper coins apiece) for a total of 3,000 copper coins, and 200 large boxes of matches (at 40 copper coins apiece) for a total of 17 silver coins and 6,300 copper coins. All 100 boxes of survival matches that I'd decided to price at 50 copper coins apiece had also sold out, so I needed to add 34 silver coins and 1,600 copper coins to the final total. All in all, I'd ended up with 51 silver coins and 1,900 copper coins, which was 1,600,000 yen in my world's money. After deducting the cost of the matches—127,550 yen from the hardware store—my profits for the day came to a whopping 1,472,450 yen.

"Damn," I said, practically whistling at this figure.

The day before, I'd been jumping for joy over making a 200,000 yen profit in an hour, but today, I'd made almost 1,500,000 yen in around three hours.

"That's 490,000 yen an hour..." I whispered to myself, marveling at the amount of money I'd made. "Do millionaires even make that much?"

Ah, I'd almost forgotten something very important. I needed to pay Aina for all she'd done for me today. I took out an envelope and dropped 10 silver coins into it.

"Here you go, Aina. Your salary for today," I said as I handed her the envelope.

“Ah, thank you very much!” she replied, taking it from me.

“Go eat something nice with your mom, all right?” I told her. “You were a huge help today, so thank you.”

“No, I’m the one who should be thanking *you*!” the little girl exclaimed. “Thank you so, so, so, so much for giving me a job!”

“Here you are thanking me like nobody’s business, even though *you’re* the one who helped *me*. I’m starting to feel a bit embarrassed here...” I admitted. “Okay, new rule. From now on, you’re banned from saying ‘thank you.’”

“Aw, but I want to say it some more!” she pouted.

I turned around to hide my reddening face from Aina, and started dropping the silver and copper coins into my rucksack. My bag was pretty heavy once I was done. Of course, I *could* have used my Inventory skill to store all of my coins, but I didn’t want to go using it recklessly in a place where I might be seen by others.

“You had so many ‘matches,’ yet you *still* managed to sell them all...” Aina said in awe. “You’re really amazing, Mister Shiro!”

She repeated the word “amazing” a couple of times as if to emphasize how truly “amazing” she thought I was. I recalled how she’d looked so, so happy each and every time we’d sold a box of matches. She clearly wasn’t used to seeing products selling so well.

I laughed. “I’m not amazing. The matches are.”

“No, no, you *are* amazing!” she insisted, squeezing her fists as she said it.

There was a sudden rumbling sound that seemed to come from her midriff. Maybe she’d been a bit *too* energetic with the movement she’d just made, but whatever the case, her stomach was starting to growl. Her cheeks flushed, and she immediately put her hands on her belly as if she was trying to get it to be quiet. She looked down at the ground in shame.

“Um, that’s...” she mumbled. “I just...”

“You’ve been working solidly since this morning. It’s only natural you’d be hungry,” I reassured her. “Here, do you want to eat this?”

I took a sandwich and a rice ball I'd bought that morning at a convenience store out of my rucksack and held them out for her to take.

"Is that..." she said, pointing at the sandwich. "Is that bread?"

"Yes, it is." I confirmed. "Ham and egg between two slices of bread."

"I've never seen such white bread before!" she exclaimed.

"Really?" I said. "Try it."

"You mean it?" she asked. "I can really have some of it?"

"Of course. I'll eat something too."

"Thank you," said the little girl.

"Ah-ah-ah!" I admonished her. "What did I say about that phrase?"

"That doesn't count. It's not the same kind of 'thank you'!" she said with a laugh before grabbing a sandwich half with her small hands and taking a bite out of it. Her eyes immediately started sparkling. "Oh, it'sh sho good! Mishter Shiro, thish ish sho good!" she mumbled through a mouth full of food.

I was really glad she liked it as much as she did. I took a bite of the rice ball and watched her eat.

"Excuse me. Might I bother you for a moment?"

A gorgeous woman had suddenly come up to us and asked me this out of nowhere. She looked to be around the same age as me (twenty-five, in case you were wondering) or maybe a little older. She had an imposing air about her, and rather a nice figure too. In fact, I'd go as far as calling her a stone-cold fox, as she was stunningly beautiful and supremely composed.

"Who, me?" I asked.

"Yes, you. Are you the person who's selling these 'matches' everyone's been talking about?" she continued.

"Ah, yes, that's me," I said. "But I'm afraid I don't have any left for today."

"Oh, I didn't come for that," the woman explained. "I wanted to talk to you."

"To me?"

“Yes, you. Oh, I forgot to introduce myself.” She flashed me a smile and said, “My name is Karen Sankareka. I’m the mayor of this town.”

No freakin’ way, I thought. This absolute bombshell is the mayor?

“So what business do you have with me, Mayor Sankareka?”

“Well, there are a few things I want to say to you. First of all, allow me to express my gratitude to you for choosing to conduct your business in our little town. It seems you’re an extremely adept merchant, and as the mayor of this town, I’m extremely grateful that you decided to come here. Thank you.”

“Oh, not at all,” I said humbly. “I should be the one thanking you for letting me do business here.”

Back in Japan, the process you had to go through to open up a store was excruciatingly painstaking, but here, it was all quick and easy, and even though trading in the town’s marketplace felt just like running a stall at a flea market, I was able to make an absurd amount of money. To say I was thankful for this would have been an understatement.

“Oh.” My response seemed to catch her off guard. “Well, color me surprised. The merchants who come here are usually rather arrogant, but it seems you’re different.”

I laughed. “Is that so?”

“Yes. After all, this is a pretty remote region, and all the merchants act like they’re doing us a huge favor by coming here. They sell us the things we need at outrageous prices and barter us down to crazily cheap prices when buying products made locally. Because of this, our finances are in a pretty bad state,” the mayor explained. “I came up with the idea of this ‘market’ to try and reverse the direction of travel.”

The pretty mayor surveyed the marketplace with a proud look on her face before turning back to me. “Anyway, on to the main reason I sought you out. First things first, I would like you to have this,” she said, handing me something that looked like a key.

“A key?” I asked. “What’s this for?”

"It's the key to my room..." Ha ha, as if! That kind of thing only happened in romance dramas. You know, the scene where one of the characters says something along the lines of *"Actually, I've booked us a room at a hotel..."*

"It's the key to my room," the mayor said.

I was so surprised by this, I made a weird noise that sounded something like *"Gwah?!"* Wait, I guessed right?! I thought. *Maybe it was love at first sight and she'd been planning to spring this on me ever since she laid eyes on me...*

"Um..." she said slowly, seeing the look on my face. "I think there's been some kind of misunderstanding. It's the key to my *old* room."

"Ah, I know what's going on!" Aina piped up all of a sudden. "Miss Mayor, you want Mister Shiro to come and live with you, don't you?"

"What are you—" she started to say.

"Marriage!" the little girl exclaimed happily. "You wanna marry Mister Shiro!"

The intensity of Aina's reaction made the mayor blush. "N-No, I don't! Just because I'm single, it doesn't mean I'm out hunting for a husband! I-I mean it! I don't! I swear on my honor as the mayor of this town, I don't!" the mayor protested, refuting the very idea of it with all of her might.

She's still single with a face and figure like that? I thought. *Well, I can't really say anything. I've barely had any romantic encounters myself, so who am I to judge?*

"Ahem! Let's get back to the topic at hand, shall we?" the mayor said, seemingly eager to change the subject. "I actually came to ask you for a favor."

"Wait, you don't mean..." I said, "marriage?!"

"N-No!" she cried.

I'd said it as a joke, but the mayor shook her head vigorously to deny that was her intention, her face all red. She came off as so beautiful and self-assured, but I got the impression she might secretly be quite shy.

"All right, so like I was saying..." she continued after composing herself again. "I've given you the key to my old house. It's at the back end of the marketplace..." she said, peering over in its direction. "Ah, look. You can see it

from here.”

She pointed at a house on the edge of the marketplace. It was a two-story building and it actually looked pretty big. In Tokyo, a house that size would’ve set you back at least a hundred million yen if you included the price of the land it was on too.

“The first floor used to be a shop,” the mayor explained. “Starting tomorrow, I’d like for you to do your business there.”

“Me?” I said, not quite understanding.

“Yes, you. You see, I had complaints from the other merchants today,” she told me. “They said the sheer size of the horde of people who were crowding around your shop made it hard for them to sell their own goods. Quite frankly, I think they were mostly just jealous, but as the mayor of this town, it’s up to me to try to resolve the matter.”

So that was what this was about. I could see how it must have been quite annoying for the other merchants to have scores of people looking to buy my goods standing in front of their shops. I’d seen people complain about that sort of thing back in Japan as well. Lines outside popular shops would sometimes stretch all the way to the entrance of the shop next door, or even farther up the street.

“I understand,” I said. “It’s true that it’ll be less of a nuisance for the other merchants if I set up my shop over there, as it’s a little bit farther out of the way of the main part of the marketplace.”

“I’m glad you’re so quick on the uptake,” she said approvingly. “Of course, as I’m the one who’s requesting you change location, you won’t need to pay any extra fees in regards to your shop. And if you need it, you can also use the second floor as a temporary residence for the duration of your contract. So what do you say? Do you accept my request?”

I still had three days left on the contract I’d signed, which was a relatively short period of time, but the good part of that was it’d let me experience having my own real brick-and-mortar store without needing to commit to a ten-day contract first. Well, well, look at me, going from being the “Little Match Boy” to having my own store in just two days. I was sure grandma must’ve been ecstatic

about the news too, probably throwing peace signs in my direction from somewhere up in Heaven.

“I know I’m asking a lot here. I can even refund your shop registration fees, if you so wish. Though that’s pretty much the extent of what I can do as the mayor. So what do you say?” she asked again.

“Mister Shiro, you’re gonna have a store?” asked Aina, who seemed really excited by this turn of events as she waited with bated breath for my answer.

I crossed my arms and thought about it for a bit.

“All right,” I said after a few moments. “If you’re willing to go that far, then I can’t really refuse. Please let me have that store.”

“I apologize once again. But thank you.”

“That’s my line, Mayor Sankareka,” I said. “Well then. Looks like I’ll be borrowing your house for the next few days.”

“Do whatever you want with the place. Even if you break a few things here and there, you won’t hear me complaining.”

“No way!” I exclaimed. “I’ll be careful!”

We both laughed before shaking hands to seal the deal. My second day of selling matches in this world, and I’d already been blessed with my own store.

Oh, incidentally, just as I was about to head off back to my own world, Aina took a peek inside the wage packet I’d given her, and promptly screamed and fainted upon seeing the 10 silver coins in there.

Chapter Six: Getting Ready for Opening

Early the next morning, I opened the closet door and “logged in” to Ruffaltio. I walked across the marketplace—there were only a few people there at this early hour—and headed to the house where I would be conducting my business from now on at the request of the mayor.

“Good morning, Mister Shiro!” Aina greeted me when I got there.

As always, she was up bright and early. I’d mustered up all of my energy to get out of bed that morning in order to make it to Ruffaltio by around six, but even at this hour, she was already waiting for me in front of the store.

Impressive, kid.

After a lengthy discussion with her the day before, we’d come to the decision that the 10 silver coins I’d given her at the end of her first day of work would be her “salary” for the month. She had been absolutely adamant that 10 silver coins was *way* too much money for just a single day of work and that she couldn’t accept that much money when most adults didn’t even earn that in a month. I’d tried to convince her that it was all right and I didn’t mind paying her that much, but she’d refused to budge. As a compromise, I’d suggested the 10 silver coins could be her monthly salary, which she’d finally ended up agreeing to. This in turn meant I needed to keep my shop open for at least a month, so after my conversation with Aina, I swung by the town hall to sign a new one-month contract for my store. It set me back nine silver coins—90,000 yen—which was exactly half what I’d earned in a month at my previous company.

More money equals more motivation.

I was a little worried about running an *actual* shop, but with Aina’s help, I was in no doubt that everything would be just fine. All I needed to do was work even harder!

“Morning, Aina,” I greeted her. “I was thinking of keeping the shop closed today so we can clean the place up a little. You okay with that?”

“Yeah! I had the same idea. Look!” she replied, showing me the wooden bucket and washcloth she was holding. She’d come fully prepared for a spring clean. What a reliable little girl she was. Her parents had done a very good job raising her.

“Good work, Aina! I knew I could count on you,” I said, beaming at her. “Well then, shall we go in?”

“Yeah!”

I used the key the mayor had given me the previous day to unlock the front door and strode into my new store. Inside, the air was heavy with dust, much as I’d suspected it would be.

“Wow. It actually looks really good in here,” I said, marveling at the store’s interior.

There was a counter at the back of the store and the side walls were lined with shelves. Everything was in such good condition, all we really needed to do to be ready for business was spruce the place up a little and put some stock on the shelves.

“All right, let’s open the window and...” I said, wrenching open a window before raising my fist in the air in a show of determination. “Right, here we go! Let’s start cleaning!”

“Yeah!” Aina whooped, imitating my pose.

First, we swept up all the dust with a broom, then we mopped the floor and wiped down the shelves with wet washcloths. Once we were done with the first floor, we did the same on the second, cleaning all four of the upstairs rooms as meticulously as we had the downstairs ones. There wasn’t any furniture up on the second floor, and it briefly crossed my mind that I should maybe go and pick up a couple of things later to put in there. We worked so hard that, by the time noon rolled around, both the first and second floors were completely spotless.

“Phew. I haven’t done a thorough clean of a place like that since New Year’s,” I wheezed, referring to the end-of-the-year clean that was a tradition in most Japanese households.

“The shop’s super clean now!” Aina said admiringly, a smile plastered across

her face.

Suddenly, we heard a voice from outside. "I'm coming in."

Just as we were finishing up the cleaning, the stone-cold fox of a mayor, Karen Sankareka, wafted in.

"Wow, I hardly recognize the place," she said, looking around at our handiwork.

"Good afternoon, Mayor Sankareka," I said.

"Call me Karen," was her reply.

"Oh, then please call me Shiro."

"And call me Aina!" the little girl piped up.

"Noted. Thank you once again for your cooperation, Shiro and Aina," Karen said, holding out her hand for each of us to shake, which Aina and I promptly did.

"So what brings you here today, Karen?" I asked.

"I prepared some refreshments for you two," the mayor replied. "Consider it an apology for cornering you the way I did yesterday." As she was speaking, Karen took what looked like a couple of sandwiches out of the basket she was carrying. They seemed to be made of brown bread and had some sort of vegetable inside. "I hope they're to your taste. Go ahead and try one, if you like."

"Oh, thank you very much," I said. "I was just starting to get a bit hungry. Let's dig in, Aina."

"Yeah!" the little girl replied.

Karen handed me a sandwich and I took a bite out of it.

"Feel free to carry on eating, but I have a couple of things I need to talk to you two about," Karen said. "First off, I have a question for you, Shiro."

"Hm? What is it?" I asked once I'd swallowed my mouthful of food. "Ask away."

"Mister Shiro! The mayor probably wants to know if you have a girlfriend!"

Aina whispered to me—though judging by Karen’s swiftly reddening face, she hadn’t been discreet enough.

She’d undoubtedly heard the little girl, and her reaction made me want to tease her a little, so I jumped on the bandwagon and asked, “Oh, is that what this is about? Well, in that case, no, I don’t have a girlfriend, Karen. I’m very single at the moment.”

“That’s not what I came here to ask!” she cried, looking extremely agitated. I couldn’t help thinking how cute it was that even the slightest thing made her blush. “Good grief. You two are the only ones in town impudent enough to make fun of the mayor.”

I turned to Aina. “You heard the lady, Aina. You need to stop making fun of her.”

“You too, Mister Shiro,” she retorted.

“Why do I get the feeling you’re just teasing me even more?” Karen said as she glared at us with scorn in her eyes.

“We’re just kidding around,” I soothed. “Anyway, what was that question you wanted to ask me?”

“Oh, don’t worry, it’s nothing major. I was just curious why an extremely adept merchant such as yourself had decided to set up shop and do business in our little town for an entire month,” she said. “After all, we barely have five hundred people living here.”

The ink wasn’t even dry on the contract I’d signed to keep my shop open for the next month and she’d already heard about it? Well, that’s the mayor for you, I guess. Or maybe she was just concerned about me after asking me to relocate my shop so suddenly. Either way, a glib answer wouldn’t cut it.

“Well, first of all, I’m not even close to being an ‘extremely adept’ merchant,” I told her. “I’m pretty much a beginner when it comes to business.”

“You can drop the comedy routine,” Karen interjected. “I’ve had people show me what they bought from you, and I can guarantee that a ‘beginner’ wouldn’t be selling anything like those ‘matches’ of yours.”

“I mean it,” I insisted. “I just got lucky.”

“You’re being much too modest,” she said. “Well, either way, you haven’t answered my question. I still cannot fathom why you would stick around here for an entire month. As the mayor, I’m ashamed to be saying this, but wouldn’t you make a lot *more* profit by going to other towns to sell your ‘matches’?” She did seem genuinely puzzled by this.

I crossed my arms and hummed softly as I pondered her question. Ninoritch was pretty much directly linked to grandma’s closet and I didn’t have the slightest clue what other towns even existed in this world, but it wasn’t like I could just say, “*Well, actually, I come from a country called ‘Japan’ in another world.*” But then, how *should* I answer?

“Well, actually...” I started. After giving it some thought, I’d decided to just tell her how I really felt. “There are a few reasons, but...” I said. “Well, the main one is simply that I like it here. I know I’ve only been in Ninoritch for four days, but I think I’ve really fallen in love with the place.”

Karen blinked, surprised at my answer. “Are you serious?”

“Yes,” I said.

“But we don’t have any industry of note here, so our tax revenue won’t ever go up. Traveling merchants pretty much take advantage of us, and most of the craftsmen who *were* here have left town already. Our one and only Adventurers’ Guild is in such bad shape, it might get dissolved any day now. And you’re telling me that you, a businessman, have ‘fallen in love’ with this remote little town?”

“Yes. I find this place extremely interesting. After all...”—I paused and looked down at Aina—“I got to meet a really hardworking little girl here and...”—my gaze shifted back to Karen—“a very kind mayor who has even gone out of her way to accommodate an outsider like me. So yes, I’ve fallen in love with this ‘remote little town.’ Oh, and the money I’ve made over the past few days might be a factor too, I guess,” I added jokingly.

“Shiro, you...” Karen said, her eyes suddenly looking a little misty.

Oh, what’s this? Was she perhaps feeling a little touched by what I’d said?

“Ah, ignore me. It’s nothing,” she said quickly, probably a little flustered by the fact that she found herself on the verge of tears. She spun on her heels so that she was facing away from me, and I noticed her bring her hand up to her eyes to wipe them. “Shiro,” she continued, still with her back to me. “Thank you for your kind words regarding our town. As the mayor, nothing makes me happier than hearing you say that.”

“Don’t mention it. To be honest, I should be the one thanking you for letting me set up my store here, even though I’m a foreigner,” I said.

This elicited a grunt of acknowledgment from Karen. “Well then, I’ll be off,” she announced as she headed for the door. “I will be praying that your store is a success.”

After seeing the mayor out, Aina skipped back over to me.

“Mister Shiro, let’s do our best with this shop!” she said excitedly with both of her hands bunched up into tight fists. She seemed even more motivated than before. Maybe it was due to what Karen had said.

“Yes, Aina, let’s do this,” I agreed.

“Yeah!” she whooped. I patted her on the head.

It might have only been for a month, but from this day forward, this was my store. I suddenly remembered something my grandma had once said to me. *Whenever you do something, make sure you always take it seriously. Your future self will thank you for it.*

Yep, I think I finally understood what she’d meant by that. *All right, I thought. If I’m gonna do this, then I’ll give it a hundred percent!*



For the opening of the new store, Aina and I decided to go and buy some brand new clothes to wear for work. I got myself a bright red jacket and a necktie, and we bought Aina’s new outfit at the town’s only clothing store—a cute, frilly skirt the same color as the sash she wore around her waist. In my new outfit, I was even more fired up than before; feeling both mentally and physically ready for what lay ahead, Aina and I opened the store.

Five days later, we hadn't even opened yet and there was already a crowd in front of the store. By this point, everyone in town and their grandmothers had bought matches from me, and yet, we were still running out every single day. And why would that be, I hear you ask? Well, according to one of our regular customers, someone had started reselling the matches in another town, where they'd also been a huge success, making a tidy profit for themselves on them. On hearing this, the townsfolk had become even more obsessed with matches, and all of them had rushed to our store. Because of this, Aina and I were busier than ever.

"Sorry but we're out of stock for today!" I announced, and a collective groan went up.

Once again, we'd run out of stock before the afternoon had even rolled around and we had to close the store at noon. But even though we'd only worked the morning, by the time we shut up shop, Aina and I were exhausted.

"I'm done cleaning the shop, Mister Shiro!" the little girl said.

"Thank you, Aina. I'll make us some tea, so head upstairs and rest for a little bit," I told her.

"Wait, I'll help you," she offered.

"No need," I said to her. "Your job ends the moment you're done with the cleaning, remember?"

"Well, ye-es..." she conceded.

"Well then. Go and wait for me upstairs, all right?"

She nodded. "Thank you, Mister Shiro," she said, before heading up to the second floor.

I'd turned one of the upstairs rooms into a break room. Well, "break room" might be pushing it a little—I'd basically just put a sofa and a coffee table from grandma's house in it.

I headed to the kitchen and boiled up some water on the portable gas stove I'd also brought over from grandma's house, then used that water to brew some decaffeinated black tea. I grabbed a tray and placed the pot full of hot tea

on it, along with two cups and a few snacks. Then, tray in hand, I finally made my way upstairs too.

“Here we are, Aina. I’ve brought us up some tea and cookies—oh.” My gaze fell on the sofa where Aina was sleeping peacefully. The hard work she’d done this morning had probably made her sleepy. “She dozed off, huh?”

I put the tray down on the coffee table before grabbing a blanket and gently placing it over Aina.

“Well, she *is* only eight, after all.”

Eight years old. In Japan, she’d still be in school, probably in second or third grade, yet here she was, forced to work despite her young age. People really did live their lives on “hard mode” in this world.

“Back when I was in grade school, I spent my days at grandma’s, and playing with my friends,” I said to myself.

A faint groan escaped the little girl’s lips. While I’d been reminiscing about my own childhood, Aina’s eyes had slowly blinked open.

“Oh, shoot. Sorry, Aina, did I wake you?”

“Papa!” she exclaimed suddenly. She looked happy—much happier than I’d ever seen her before. I realized immediately that she was still half asleep.

“Hey, Aina, it’s me. Shiro,” I said, waving my hand in front of her face to try to wake her up properly, but her eyes still looked unfocused. It seemed like she was dreaming.

“Papa, I was waiting for you to come back...”—there was a brief, drowsy pause—“for so long.” She raised both of her arms in the air. “Cuddles, papa, cuddles!”

The Aina in front of me was acting very differently from the Aina I knew. This Aina was just a regular little girl who wanted attention from one of her parents.

“S-Sure thing,” I said after a few seconds of hesitation. I gently lifted her off the sofa and took her in my arms. “Like this?”

“Yeah, that’s it. Oh, papa...” she said with a dreamy little smile on her face. “You finally gave me cuddles...”

She evidently thought I was her pops in her half asleep state. The little girl wrapped her arms around my neck and squeezed with all her might.

“Mama was waiting for you to come home too,” she said. Her speech was becoming gradually more labored. “Give cuddles to...mama too...all...right?” Her breathing slowed again.

“Huh?” I said, looking down at her. “Did she nod off again? Are you kidding me?”

Maybe it was because she felt more at peace cuddling up to me, but whatever the case, she’d fallen back into Morpheus’s arms almost instantly. I gently set her back down on the couch and placed the blanket over her again. *She looks like a little angel*, I thought as I gazed down at her sleeping face.

“‘Papa,’ huh?” I mused to myself.

I was starting to get the feeling that Aina had her fair share of issues she was dealing with as well. She always had a bright smile on her face, but occasionally, when she thought I wasn’t looking, I would catch her looking concerned.

“Aina, if there’s anything I can do to help you, you have to let me know, okay?” I told her as she slept. “I’ll do my best to help you.”

Maybe it was because of my words—or maybe it wasn’t—but the pure little angel on the couch smiled gently.

Chapter Seven: Karen's Request

The day after Aina's little sleep-talking episode, I decided to give her the day off. She protested, of course, telling me she didn't need time off, but it was obvious she was exhausted. After all, it'd take anyone a while to adjust to a new job. But she wouldn't relent, telling me over and over that she'd come into work anyway. She was surprisingly stubborn on some topics.

Well, in that case, I'd just have to exercise my power as the owner of the shop, wouldn't I? In the end, I managed to force her to take a day off, and even though she pouted the whole time, I knew it was for the best. After all, when it comes to work, nothing's more important than your health. I'd realized that when I was working at my last company. That's why I wanted to make sure Aina got the rest she needed.

"Phew, talk about busy!"

As I'd expected, it had been a pretty hectic day having to deal with customers on my own. I'd gotten to experience firsthand just how hard it was to run a store all by yourself.

"It was kinda crazy, but I have to admit, actually getting properly compensated for your efforts is quite a nice feeling," I observed.

I'd managed to sell out again. I'd replaced my mountains of matches with piles of copper and silver coins.

"So that was my sixth day in this store, huh?" I said to myself. "Maybe it's because they're making a profit from reselling them, but a lot of customers have started buying more and more matches recently. Hm, guess I should start putting a limit on the amount one person can buy in one go."

My daily profits were always exactly the same. Three hundred small boxes of matches priced at five copper coins apiece equaled 1,500 copper coins. A hundred big boxes of matches priced at 55 copper coins apiece (my "grand opening sale" had finished by this point) equaled 5,500 copper coins. And

finally, a hundred boxes of survival matches priced at 50 copper coins apiece came to 5,000 copper coins. Grand total: 12,000 copper coins (or 1,200,000 yen). I spent 81,250 yen on matches every day, meaning my net profit at the end of it all was 1,118,750 yen a day. And I'd been doing this for six days, which meant my total profit since I'd started conducting my business in Karen's old house was a whopping 6,712,500 yen.

Pretty impressive, huh? That's 6,700,000 yen in less than a *week*! Who knew how rich I'd become if I kept this up for an entire year?

"If I work hard for a year tops, maybe I'll be able to spend the rest of my days after that as a NEET."

I'd be able to live life in the slow lane, watching anime and playing games all day long. While I was lost in my own delusions, thinking about my dream life that most people would frown upon, there was a knock at the door. I peeked out of the window and saw Karen standing there.

"Oh, hello, Karen. Did you go out of your way to come and check on me? Well, as you can probably tell, business is going gangbusters. Everything's sold out yet again!" I told her proudly.

But she simply shook her head and said, "That's not why I came today."

"Oh. Shame. What brings you here, then?" I asked.

"I have a request for you," she said.

"A request?"

"Yes," she said, nodding. She had a severe expression on her face, which indicated it was something terribly important.

"Hm. Well, let's talk about it inside, shall we?" I suggested. "Come in! Oh, what am I saying? This is your house."

"What are you talking about?" she said. "You're the one currently staying here. I might technically be the owner of the property, but you're the one who gets to decide who can and can't come in."

"That makes sense," I conceded. "Well, then. Please come in."

She laughed. "Thank you."

I took her up to the break room on the second floor, and offered her a seat on the sofa. I brewed up some tea and sat down in a chair opposite her.

“Okay, so what’s this request you have for me?”

“Hm...” Karen ruminated. “Before I tell you that, I have a question. Do you know about the town’s Adventurers’ Guild?”

“Of course. If I remember correctly, they’re called...” —I searched my memory banks—“‘the Silver Moon,’ I think, right?”

“Oh, you even know their name,” she said, sounding impressed. “You sure do pick things up fast.”

“Well, a lot of my customers are adventurers, and the name of their guild isn’t all that hard to remember.”

And it wasn’t just my customers—over half of the market-goers in this town were adventurers. It was very clear they had a big influence on the local economy.

“I see,” the mayor said. “Do you know how the Adventurers’ Guild works?”

“More or less, yes.”

I tried to remember what my customers had told me about it. As far as I could tell, the Adventurers’ Guild was pretty similar to a temp agency in Japan, with its members basically being day laborers. The guild would assign different missions to individual teams of adventurers, and when the job was over, they would take a cut of the reward—that’s how they made their profit. Adventurers were a huge help to the town, because as long as they were paid adequately, they’d get rid of monsters that were attacking people and livestock, or fetch herbs and mushrooms which could be used to make medicine.

But above all, for a poor town like Ninoritch, the Adventurers’ Guild was the most significant source of money. As their base of operations was in the town itself, adventurers would settle here for a relatively long period of time, plus the guild also attracted merchants who were interested in monster loot. The more people there were in town, the more money there was. And the more money there was, the more people there were. From an economic standpoint, the guild was an important part of Ninoritch.

“Well, if you already know all of that, I shouldn’t need to be here too long,” Karen said after I’d outlined everything I’d heard about the guild. “It’s not official yet, but...” She brought her face closer to mine and continued in a lower voice. “The guildmaster of the Silver Moon has...”

“Th-The guildmaster?!” I exclaimed.

The “guildmaster”! The person who ran the entire Adventurers’ Guild! Just the simple act of that word being spoken was enough to awaken my inner child. It really wasn’t befitting of someone my age to react in this way, but my heart started pounding in my chest. Another world equals adventurers! Sadly, I didn’t have the necessary skills to fight monsters, but what I *did* have was an inexhaustible fascination for Adventurers’ Guilds. Very much so.

“Did something happen to the guildmaster? What’s happened? Come on, tell me, please!” I pleaded.

Karen just stared at me while I almost hyperventilated with excitement.

“He apparently skipped town last night,” she sighed.

I hadn’t been expecting that, and my brain froze up for a second. “Huh? What did you say? He skipped...” I said, trailing off. “What?!”

“The person working as the guildmaster of our one and only Adventurers’ Guild skipped town last night with the entirety of the guild’s operating funds. Because of this, the other staff there got into something of a panic, and the adventurers are now all threatening to leave as well,” she explained in a tone that sounded like she’d already lost all hope.

“Wait a minute, Karen,” I said breathlessly. “That’s a pretty big deal!”

“Yes, it is,” she concurred. “Even more so for our little town. That’s why I need to act fast.”

“What do you plan to do?” I asked.

“Well, as it happens, an Adventurers’ Guild in the capital has been wanting to open up a branch here.”

“Huh? Wait a second. The Adventurers’ Guild in Ninoritch and this other one you just mentioned...” I said. “They’re two different organizations?”

Karen looked perplexed at my question. “You...” she started, sounding almost in disbelief that she even had to ask this question. “You *do* know there are several Adventurers’ Guilds, don’t you?”

“Several?”

“Huh. You really don’t know.”

“Forgive my ignorance,” I apologized.

“It’s all right. I’ll explain it all to you,” the mayor said. “Well, as you’ve just found out, there are several different Adventurers’ Guilds in this nation.”

“Different branches, you mean?”

“No,” she said, shaking her head.

Oh. So that wasn’t what she’d meant...

“All right, listen closely,” she continued. “First of all...”

She started telling me all about Adventurers’ Guilds, from their origins to their duties, their structure, and their standing within the country. To cut a long story short, Adventurers’ Guilds were in charge of handling adventurers, many of whom were ruffians. To become a member of one, you had to pass an exam, and if you were successful, you’d be awarded with a “certificate of qualification” that proved your status as an adventurer and allowed you to take different jobs—depending on your rank—at an Adventurers’ Guild. That part was relatively similar to what I’d already outlined before. But I was very surprised by what Karen told me next.

“There are several Adventurers’ Guilds. They are not all, as you suggested, branches of one single guild. They’re all different guilds,” she said.

According to her, in the Giruam Kingdom alone, there were plenty of different organizations that ran their own Adventurers’ Guilds.

“To put it simply, there’s not one giant monolith known as ‘The Adventurers’ Guild.’ There are several smaller ones. Some are prosperous and have plenty of members and some are, well, like our Silver Moon—on the brink of collapse.”

“Ah, I see now. Got it. So that’s how it is, huh?” I said when she’d finished.

In short, it wasn't "The Adventurers' Guild" at all. It was the "Adventurers' Guilds," plural. It was kind of like newspapers or TV channels in that you technically get the same service, just from different providers. Or take something like wrestling, for example: even though all the wrestlers participate in the same activity, they're split across many wrestling federations.

"So there are some things even you aren't knowledgeable about. I have to say, I'm a little surprised."

I laughed. "Believe it or not, there are many things I don't know."

"You really are modest," she observed. "Anyway, back to the topic at hand. Up until now, I'd always refused requests from this Adventurers' Guild from the capital to open up a branch in Ninoritch out of consideration for the Silver Moon guild. You see, for a guild to set up a branch somewhere, they need the authorization of the head of that town—which in this case is me. But considering the situation we find ourselves in now, I'm actually thinking of accepting their offer."

"Well, adventurers are important to the town, and you might lose them all if you don't..." I said. "I think it's the smart thing to do."

"Thank you. Hearing you say that alleviates some of my worries," she said, placing a hand on her chest and finally flashing me a smile.

"And that brings me to the purpose of my visit," she continued, the serious expression returning to her face.

I sat up straight, all ears now. "Yes?"

"If I accept their offer, an inspector from the capital Adventurers' Guild will come here to survey the area sometime in the near future."

"To decide whether or not they really want to set up a branch here, right?" I guessed.

"Exactly. I suppose their main aim is to get a look at the rare monsters that have supposedly been sighted in the nearby forest. But I'm worried that if those monsters actually *aren't* there, they might withdraw their offer completely."

"That makes sense, yes," I agreed.

“That’s why I need your help,” the mayor said firmly.

“My help?” I asked, surprised.

“Yes. Shiro, I want you to show your ‘matches’ to the inspector.”

“I don’t really mind...” I said slowly. “But is there really any point in me doing that?”

“There is,” she answered almost immediately. “I’ve never seen anything like those ‘matches’ of yours before, not even in the royal capital, and I’ve been there a few times. It makes me think you might be the only person with access to these products.”

“Uh...” I hesitated. “No comment.”

“Don’t get me wrong,” she added quickly. “I’m not asking you to tell me your real identity. But I was just thinking, if that inspector saw that our little town was the only place you could get these matches, it might attract the guild’s interest.”

“I see. You want the inspector to think there’s something of value in Ninoritch other than the monsters in order to get them a little more interested in setting up a branch here. Is that it?” I summed up.

“Precisely,” the mayor confirmed. “As one would expect of an extremely adept businessman like yourself, you are very quick on the uptake.”

I laughed. “Please stop calling me that. But I see where you’re coming from. I basically just have to show the inspector an item that will grab their attention, right?”

“Yes. Can I entrust this to you?” she asked.

“Of course,” I said.

“Thank you. I’m much obliged to you.”

“Don’t mention it.”

“Even so...” the mayor continued. “Thank you, Shiro. I hope you can forgive me for repeatedly making all these unreasonable requests. As the mayor of this town, I promise that I will repay your kindness one day.”

I laughed again. “Like I said before, you don’t need to think so hard about it. It’s normal for people to help each other out. I’ve managed to make a lot of profit in this town thanks to the policies you’ve put in place here, so it’s my turn to help you.”

Karen just stared at me in amazement. “I see. You are a very kind man indeed. Well, anyway, I should probably be getting back,” she said, and got up and left.

Alone in the store again, I crossed my arms and started ruminating on what had just been asked of me. I had to grab the attention of this inspector with an item, huh? The matches would certainly do that, but I should probably find some other items for the task as well, just in case. Hm, what should I get?



It was the day after the discussion I’d had with Karen, and once again, Aina—who was looking much better after her day off—and I had managed to sell all of our matches before noon. I then spent the afternoon trying to decide what product I should bring over from Japan to wow the inspector with. It wasn’t an overstatement to say that this town’s future depended on this decision, which is probably why I spent so long mulling it over. “Hmmm...” was my favorite word that day.

Karen seemed to think the matches would be enough, but I wanted to get at least one more item that would really grab the inspector’s attention and not let go. But as I wasn’t an adventurer myself—I wasn’t even from this world—I had no idea what item I should go for. *Well, looks like I don’t really have a choice, do I?* I thought.

“All right, I’ve decided,” I announced. I’d finally come to a conclusion on what the best course of action was.

“Hm? What have you decided, Mister Shiro?” Aina asked, as she finished up her lunch (that I’d prepared).

“I’m glad you asked, Aina,” I said to the little girl. “You see, yesterday, Karen came over and...” I told her everything that had happened the day before.

“Huh. So you’re gonna show your matches to these, uh...”—she paused before attempting the next word—“...Ad-vent-you-rers’ Guild people?”

“Yep, yep, exactly. That’s what Karen asked me to do,” I confirmed. “But I’d also like to find *another* item adventurers will be interested in.”

“Ah, okay! So that’s what you decided! The item you’re going to bring! Right, Mister Shiro?” Aina guessed.

“Nope, wrong!” I said. “What I actually decided was...”

“What you actually decided was...” Aina repeated, tilting her head to one side inquisitively.

I outlined my plan to her, to which her response was a very loud, very surprised “Whaaat?!”



“And that’s why I’ve decided I want to accompany members of the guild on one of their adventures, Karen.”

I was sitting in the mayor’s office in the town hall opposite Karen, who was sitting behind her desk, listening intently to my idea.

“Shiro...” she said, seemingly taken aback by what I’d suggested. “Are you sure about this?”

“Yes, I am. If I want to understand exactly what an adventurer needs, I have to accompany a handful of them on an adventure and get some firsthand experience of what they go through,” I explained.

The conclusion I’d reached was a pretty simple one: I would go on an adventure with a few members of the guild and find out what they needed, which would clue me in on exactly what kind of product would sell well with them. I could just ask them directly, of course, but that wouldn’t give me the full picture.

“But the adventurers here only venture into the forest east of the town, and that place is way more dangerous than you seem to think it is,” the mayor protested.

“I know what I’m getting myself into. But don’t worry, I’m not planning on doing anything dangerous. I’d just like to accompany the adventurers whose mission is to gather ore and...” —I paused as I searched for the name of what I

was thinking of—“What was it again? Oh, yes. Medicinal herbs. Though, if you prefer, I could just hire a couple of adventurers to be my escort while I camp out for a few days in the forest.”

“Hm, well, granted, that doesn’t sound *too* dangerous...”

“Right? So that’s why I’m here to ask you...”—and this is where I bent forward to indicate that this was the really important part—“Could you possibly introduce me to some adventurers?”

“Good grief. You’re seriously asking me to do that while I’m here, trying to get rid of the Silver Moon guild. You’re really twisting my arm here.”

I laughed. “I know, but you’re the only one I can rely on.”

I could see the predicament my request placed her in. The Silver Moon was this town’s only Adventurers’ Guild, and Karen was in the middle of trying to undercut it by getting another guild to set up a subsidiary in Ninoritch. Of course I knew she wasn’t the best person to ask this favor of, but at the end of the day, my only friends here were her and Aina, and Aina was a child, so I didn’t really have much of a choice.

“Adventurers, huh? What to do, what to do...” she mused, bringing her hand up to her slender jaw and rubbing it, deep in thought.

“Is it really not possible?” I asked her.

“Well, it’s difficult, for sure,” she admitted. “To be quite honest with you, I’m not on very good terms with the Silver Moon’s acting guildmaster at the moment.”

“Oh, really? Can I ask the reason or...”

Karen glanced up at me before answering. “Well, I guess I can tell *you* about it. Last night, the acting guildmaster came to me and asked me...”—she paused for a second before letting out a sigh—“...to lend the guild some money.”

“That’s a pretty bold request,” I said.

“Tell me about it.”

“How much do they want?”

She let out another sigh and her face twisted into a painful grimace, almost as if she was suffering from a really bad headache.

“Ten gold coins,” she said.

“What?!” I exclaimed. “T-Ten gold coins?!”

“Yes. If it was—I don’t know—a tenth of that, I might have considered it, but...” she said helplessly. “Ten gold coins is impossible. There’s no way a small town like ours would have access to such a huge sum of money.”

Ten gold coins was the equivalent of ten million yen. It seemed as if the Silver Moon guild was on the verge of bankruptcy. And the problem with them asking for the mayor to use public funds to try to bail them out was that doing something like that might lead to the collapse of both the Silver Moon guild *and* Ninoritch. It was no surprise that Karen felt she couldn’t take such a risky bet.

“So that’s what happened...” I said. “I understand now. After your refusal to accede to the acting guildmaster’s demands, you introducing me to members of the Silver Moon guild is pretty much impossible, isn’t it?”

“Exactly. To hire adventurers, you have to go through the guild,” she said, before stopping and correcting herself. “Or well, it’s common practice to do that. After all, if I went and hired adventurers directly, it’d be a huge blow to the Silver Moon’s honor.”

“Yes, I’d imagine so,” I said thoughtfully.

“So to sum up, we can only hire adventurers through the Silver Moon, but as I’ve laid out, I’m currently on very bad terms with their acting guildmaster,” she summarized.

“Right.”

“Well, as a last-ditch effort, I’ll write a letter to the acting guildmaster. But you shouldn’t get your hopes up,” she warned me.

She picked up the quill on her desk, dipped it in ink, and started to write.

“Here you go. Give that to the acting guildmaster,” she said, handing me the piece of paper.

“Thank you very much,” I said.

“No, I’m the one who should be thanking *you*, Shiro. You’ve done so much for our little town, even though you’re not even from here.” She stood up and bowed deeply. “Thank you for helping Ninoritch to grow. I promise I shall reward you for your efforts, but for now, please let me rely on you for a little while longer.”

“What are you saying? I’m the one relying on your townspeople. I’ve been making so much profit thanks to them,” I said, smiling cheekily and rubbing my fingers together in the time-honored, universal gesture to indicate that I wasn’t short of a coin or two.

She giggled. “You’re really kind. Thank you. I mean it.”

Once our little discussion had concluded, I took the letter Karen had written and headed for the Silver Moon guild.

The Silver Moon guild was located on the east side of town.

“Is this the place?” I wondered aloud as I stopped in front of a huge one-story building. A sign with the words “Silver Moon” on it was mounted above the door. “Yup, this is the Silver Moon Adventurers’ Guild all right. Guess I must be a bit nervous, huh?”

And why wouldn’t I be? It *was* an Adventurers’ Guild, after all. No doubt it was a raucous place, full of brawny men drinking copious amounts of alcohol in the middle of the day, all of them laughing vulgarly at the newest recruits who they were having fun tripping up. And of course, if anyone dared to complain about this behavior, they would receive a good tongue-lashing, which would ultimately lead to a massive brawl... Or at least, that was the image that sprang to mind whenever I heard the words “Adventurers’ Guild.”

“Calm down, Shiro. It’ll be okay,” I tried to reassure myself. “I’m not even an adventurer. I’m a merchant. They’re not gonna try to trip me up. Also, I’ve got Karen’s letter. It’s definitely gonna be fine. *Definitely*. All right! Let’s go!” I said, trying to pump myself up before pushing the door open.

“Um, excuse me, is the acting guildmaster here...” I started, then paused and looked around. “Huh?”

The barely lit room I’d stepped into was so quiet you could’ve heard a pin

drop, which was a far cry from the pandemonium I'd been expecting.

"Interesting..." I muttered to myself. "There seems to be no one here."

No muscle-bound men getting hammered, no new recruits being messed with, nothing. Or at least, that's what I thought, until I heard what sounded like a woman crying softly.

Sob sob sob sob...

“Wha? Wh-Who’s there?!” I asked with a start as I peered around the room.

Don't tell me... I thought, a sinking feeling taking root in my stomach. Is this place haunted?! Well, I was in another world, so anything's possible.

Sob sob sob sob...

I glanced in the direction of where I thought the sobs were coming from and noticed a girl behind what I could only assume was the reception desk. She had her face in her hands.

Sob sob sob sob sob sob sob sob...

She seemed to be wearing some sort of uniform, which made me think she must be involved with the guild in one way or another. I couldn't really blame her for letting the tears flow—after all, the guildmaster had skipped town the night before and the guild was on the verge of bankruptcy—but even so, I needed to talk to her.

“Um, excuse me...”

Sob sob sob sob sob sob sob sob...

“Um, the mayor told me to come down here—”

*Sob sob sob sob sob sob sob sob sob sob sob sob sob sob sob sob sob sob sob
sob
sob sob sob sob sob sob sob sob sob sob sob sob sob...*

"She's not listening, is she?"

The girl just wouldn't stop crying. She hadn't once looked up at me since I'd walked in and I was pretty sure she hadn't even noticed I was there.

“Well, looks like I don’t have much of a choice. Guess I’ll just have to try and

grab her attention.” I reached over the counter and placed my hand on her shoulder. “Excuse me. Could you help me?” I said, shaking her by the shoulder.

“Huh?”

Ah, she’d *finally* noticed me. She looked up, and as she did so, I caught a glimpse of her bunny ears. *So she’s a bunny girl, huh?* I thought to myself. She regarded me wordlessly.

“Excuse me. Might I talk to you for a second?” I tried again.

She simply stared at me without replying, before looking down at my hand on her shoulder, then back up at me again. Then, all of a sudden, she started flailing around and making panicked noises.

“Please calm down,” I said softly. “Could I please just—”

“Wh-Who are you?!” she interrupted. “When did you come in?! What business do you have with me?! Why’s your hand on me?! Do you like me? Is that it?!”

She shook my hand off her shoulder and took a few steps back.

“This is the Silver Moon Adventurers’ Guild! I’m warning you now: all it’d take for a thousand battle-hardened adventurers to immediately come running over here is one scream from the guild’s cute mascot!” she yelled at me, before adding, “That’s me!”

“There’s no one in here, though...” I pointed out as I looked behind me. “See?”

“It’s...” she faltered. “It’s just a coincidence! It just so happens that everyone’s out right now!”

What kind of explanation was that? She sounded like a child.

“And I should also warn you that I know how to fight!” she declared, balling up her hands into fists and punching the air a few times to make sure I got the message. “My fists are so strong, they can break rocks! You’d better not underestimate me!”



Man, this girl was a real pain in the neck. “Look, I’m sorry for touching you without your permission,” I said. “But I tried calling out to you a number of times and you weren’t answering, so I didn’t have much choice.”

“Huh?” This seemed to surprise her enough to stop her little shadowboxing display.

“Also, I have business here,” I continued. “Could you please help me?”

“Business?” she asked.

“Yes, business,” I said with a nod.

The bunny girl stared at me for a while, then looked me up and down. “A young hume male...” she pondered aloud. “Ah! I’ve got it! You want to register as an adventurer with us, is that it?”

“Huh? Uh, no, actually—”

“Well, you’re in luck, mister! We’d normally ask you for one silver coin if you wanted to take the adventurer exam, but we currently have a *super special* offer on, where for a mere *five* silver coins, we’ll—wait for it—register you with the guild without you needing to take the exam!”

My response to this was a blank, wordless look.

“And on *top* of that...” she said, continuing her preprepared spiel. “Throw in 10 more silver coins and you can immediately start out as a bronze-rank adventurer! Bronze! Isn’t that great?! Just imagine the pleasure you’ll get from being one step ahead of all the other newbies before you even start. Don’t you want to experience that?”

She wiggled from side to side as she spoke, occasionally shooting me the odd glance to gauge my reaction.

“And what would I get for 20 silver coins?” I said, going along with it.

“T-Twenty?! That *much*?! ” she gasped. “Wait, are you rich? Um, for 20 silver coins...” she said slowly as she tried to think of a perk that would entice me to part with my money. “Y-You’d be immediately bumped up to silver-rank!”

She leaned over the counter, gripped me tightly by the shoulders, and

brought her face so close to mine, our noses were almost touching.

“What do you say to that? That’s the fourth-highest rank! Makes you want to join the guild right here and now, doesn’t it? Doesn’t it? So cough up—I mean, that’ll be 20 silver coins, please!” she said, and I could see the desperate look in her wide eyes. She was mad. Totally money-mad. And she really, really, *really* wanted me to pay up.

“Oh, that was just a joke,” I said, shaking her off me. “I don’t actually plan on joining the guild.”

She just stood there and let out a disappointed “Oh.”

“I’m not an aspiring adventurer, I’m afraid. I came here to have a chat with the acting guildmaster,” I explained. “Could you please go get them for me?”

The bunny girl mumbled something I didn’t catch that ended with the word “guildmaster.”

“Excuse me?” I said.

“That’s me. I’m the acting guildmaster,” she muttered.

There was a brief pause while this sank in, but once it had, I couldn’t contain my disbelief.

“*What?!*” I exclaimed loudly, and perhaps it was due to the fact there was no one else in the room, but my incredulous cry echoed all around the guild building.

Chapter Eight: The Silver Moon Adventurers' Guild

The bunny girl told me her name was Emille and went on to explain how she'd become the Silver Moon's acting guildmaster. It was actually rather simple: she was the only member of staff left at the guild. Well, that wasn't *quite* true. There was apparently another girl still on the books, but it looked as if she'd disappeared the same night the guildmaster had skipped town. So Emille had been left with no choice but to take on the role of acting guildmaster. I did feel a little sorry for her after hearing of her plight.

"Those frickin' rats!" Emille cursed. "They had an affair, y'know. They didn't realize I knew about it, but I did. They were kissing and canoodling everywhere they went, all the damn time. They'd sneak off to the guildmaster's room and all you'd hear is lots of 'aahhh's and 'mmmm's. I swear, the number of times I wanted to off myself while all that was going on..." Emille paused before going off on a different tack. "Hm, I wonder if they're dead now. Or if they're not dead, maybe they got captured by bandits who stole all their money, tortured them, then sold them at a slave market for five copper coins. Five for *both* of them, naturally."

While this may have sounded a bit like a joke, she looked extremely serious when she was airing these rather ghastly thoughts of hers. Five copper coins for the pair of them? She thought their lives were collectively worth no more than 500 yen? She was scary. Super scary.

"Uh..." I started, trying to find some response to this. "I guess it must've been tough for you. Kudos for enduring all that."

"Thank you, mister. You're very kind. You know..." she said slowly and with a slight twinkle in her eye, "I like kind people." She suddenly seemed to remember something. "Ah, I almost forgot! You had something to tell me, didn't you?"

"Yes, I do. First of all..."—I paused briefly to take out the letter Karen had given me—"Would you mind reading this? It's from the mayor."

The bunny girl had taken the envelope out of my hands as soon as I'd produced it, and was in the process of opening it when the word "mayor" made her stop abruptly.

"Sorry, *who* did you say it was from?" she asked, her voice dripping with disgust.

"Th-The mayor..." I stuttered.

"Hm. And when you say 'the mayor,' do you mean *that* mayor?"

"Wh-What mayor?"

"Oh, come on now, don't play dumb," she chided me. "The mayor of this town. That frickin' pervert with the absurdly huge melons."

Huh? I thought. For some reason, I thought I'd heard the words "frickin' pervert" but that didn't seem right. Maybe the translation function on grandma's ring was on the blink?

"Oh, uh..." I said, laughing awkwardly. "I'm not sure who you're talking about, but the person who wrote that letter is the mayor of Ninoritch, Karen."

"So it's a letter from that heartless tramp who's all breast, no brain, huh? Well, here's my reply!" she exclaimed, and she ripped up the letter without reading it.

"Ah!" I gasped in dismay. "The letter Karen so kindly wrote for me!"

"Since you brought me that letter, you must know, right?" Emille said accusingly. "What she's trying to do, I mean."

"What she's trying to do?" I didn't know how to answer this, so I decided to play dumb for the time being.

"She's abandoning Silver Moon and trying to replace us with another Adventurers' Guild. Isn't that awful? Isn't it cruel?!"

"Uh, yeah, it is..." I said falteringly.

"You know what I hate the most? Unfaithfulness and fickleness. Growing up, my papa and mama always told me I should strive to be 'earnest.' But that woman..." seethed Emille. "We've worked together for so many years, yet here

she is, trying to set up another guild in the town so she can get rid of us! She's a total bitch," she ranted without even pausing for breath.

Once she'd finished her tirade, she had a gulp of the water that was on the counter.

"I got down on my hands and knees and begged, but she still refused to give me the mere 10 gold coins I needed! Heartless woman."

"Well, I mean, 10 gold coins is a pretty hefty sum..." I pointed out.

"Are you siding with that old maid, mister?" she pouted. "The only thing she's got going for her is those massive hooters! You know, I..."—she paused slightly—"I always thought Karen and I were friends, but..."

She was saying some pretty horrible stuff about someone who was supposedly her "friend." I was quite taken aback by it. I couldn't recall ever hearing someone throw the word "friend" around with so little weight attached to it. It reminded me of something grandma had once said to me: *Real friends won't hold a grudge against someone just because they've refused to do them a favor.* Seems she'd been right about that all along.

"If we don't get money fast, Silver Moon is done for. And yet..." she said dolefully before her rage at her former friend bubbled up to the surface again. "Karen, you're so cruel! Even though we promised each other we'd be friends forever, you won't even lend me money. We're done for..." she lamented before taking another big gulp of water.

"Are you?" I asked.

"Yeah. We are," Emille said firmly. "Hey, mister, can I bend your ear? I need someone to vent to."

"Of course. I'm sure you'll feel much better if you get it all off your chest," I said.

"Thank you!" Emille exclaimed happily. "I'll take you up on that offer."

"Go right ahead."

"Well, you see, it all started because of that rotten guildmaster who smells like a wet goblin..."

She talked for a very long time, with me occasionally throwing in the odd “Mhm-mhm” or some comment along the lines of “That’s awful” and “Really?” as she spewed her venom. This went on for five hours, and to sum up, this was what had happened: with the Silver Moon guild already in a pretty rocky situation financially, the former guildmaster had skipped town, leaving them in an even bigger hole, given that he’d flown the coop with all their remaining funds. In their current state, not only could they not buy the monster loot the adventurers had retrieved, they couldn’t even pay them for the work they did for the guild. Naturally, the adventurers had been absolutely furious about this, insisting that Emille pay them for their labor, but it wasn’t like she could just magic money out of thin air. In a last-ditch effort to placate them, she’d paid the adventurers with some of the monster loot the guild had in its stores—but that meant she didn’t have anything left to sell to the merchants. The guild’s veterans had all departed, and the only adventurers still kicking around were the low-ranked members, who consisted mostly of old people and young boys. She’d finally swallowed her pride and gone to beg Karen for money, only to be met with a “Sorry...” and little else.

“I’m really at the end of my rope here...” she lamented.

“You’ve had a pretty rough life for someone so young, Emille,” I said sympathetically.

“Tell me about it! Ah, I feel like crying,” she moaned, pretending to sob. “Oh, by the way, have you heard about these ‘matches’ everyone in town’s been talking about recently? Apparently, if you take them over to the trading city west of here, you can resell them for many, *many* times more than you bought them for.”

“R-Really?” I said, feigning ignorance. But of course I knew about them—I was the one selling those matches.

“Some of the adventurers who were here went to the trading city to resell some of those ‘matches’ too. And the day before yesterday, they came back here just to taunt me about it, telling me their little reselling scheme pays a whole lot better than the jobs they’d gotten at the guild! What a joke. It’s thanks to this guild they were even making money up until now! But what can you do?” she rambled as she grabbed a bottle of alcohol from the shelf behind

her and refilled her glass.

Ah. So it wasn't water.

"Can I ask you something?" I said. "Why do you even stay here? After all, the former guildmaster's skipped town, so why not just follow his lead and cut and run as well?"

I couldn't even count the number of times I'd thought of just walking out of my job when I worked at my previous company.

"You really don't understand girls' feelings, do you?" she said.

"I'd argue I know quite a lot about your feelings after listening to you telling me about them for so long," I suggested.

"Nah, that was just me venting," she said dismissively. "I'm talking about *girls' feelings*."

"Okay, okay, my bad," I capitulated. "What is it I don't understand?"

Before answering my question, Emille downed her alcohol in one, then placed the empty glass back down on the counter and wiped her mouth. "It's a s-e-c-r-e-t. I'm not telling."

I was lost for words at this response. For some reason, I was starting to feel pressure in my temples. *Deep breath. Just take a deep breath.*

"Ah, I know that look!" Emille said suddenly. "You think I'm annoying, don't you?"

"I don't," I said unconvincingly after a slight pause.

"Yes, you do!" she insisted. "It's written all over your face! You think I'm super cute, but a little bit of an idiot. But you think even that side of me is cute! That's what you're thinking, am I right?"

"And you got all that just from looking at my face?" I said skeptically.

She suddenly turned all pouty again. "Anyway, your business here is concluded, right? The exit's over there," she said, pointing to the door.

"It's not concluded at all!" I exclaimed.

"Well, I don't have anything to say to an errand boy for that frickin' pervert,"

she sniffed.

“That’s a really rude thing to say to someone who’s just listened to you vent for the last five hours.”

“Hmph!” The pouting bunny girl puffed out her cheeks and flicked her head to the side. What was she, a kid?

“Please just listen to what I have to say,” I pleaded with her. “I get it. You and Karen—I mean, the mayor—have a complicated relationship. It’s fine. Just forget about the letter.”

“I’ve already forgotten about that stupid thing!” she huffed.

“Good. Well then...” I said and cleared my throat before putting on my best “customer service” smile. “Miss Emille, I would like to hire the Silver Moon guild for a job. Would that be possible?”

The effects of that single sentence were spectacular. Literally the moment I’d finished speaking, Emille—who’d been sprawled out across the countertop up until then—immediately straightened up. “Oh, of course! What can I do for you, mister?” she asked.

I was impressed at how quickly her attitude had changed.



I laid out my request to Emille.

“Uh-huh, right...” she said slowly when I was done. “So just to recap: you want to accompany some of the guild’s adventurers and have them protect you while they carry on with whatever mission it is they’re on. Have I got that right?”

“Yes,” I confirmed.

“We’ve never gotten a commission like that before. Can I write it down as an escort mission?” she asked.

“Fine by me. So do you think you could introduce me to some adventurers? Is there anyone who might be able to help me with my request?”

“Well, if you’re looking for an escort, it should be someone pretty strong...”

Emille said, looking thoughtful.

“Ah, I figured it might not be so easy to find someone,” I admitted.

There were barely any adventurers still at the guild, after all. All of them had left to go sell my matches in neighboring towns. I never expected my own business venture to come back to bite me like this.

“Hm, well, we *do* have one pretty strong adventurer party on the books, but...” she hesitated.

“But?” I prompted.

“They’re quite high-ranked and commissioning them would be expensive.”

“How much?”

Emille put her hands up in front of her chest and splayed all of her fingers. “It’s a party of four, so for an escort mission, it’d cost you at *least* 10 silver coins a day.”

Since there were four of them, that meant each party member would get two silver coins and 50 copper coins—25,000 yen—for one day of work. I’d once read online that hiring a bodyguard for eight hours in Japan would set you back more than 50,000 yen, so by comparison, this guild was exceptionally cheap.

“So you’re planning on it being a three-day, two-night trip, correct? In that case, it’ll cost 30 silver coins. The guild also takes a commission fee of twenty percent, so that’s an additional two silver coins, which means the grand total to hire this party comes to 32 silver coins. Would that be all right for you?”

“Of course,” I said as I took out a pouch full of silver coins and set it down on the counter, the coins inside clinking as I did so. “I don’t see any reason to be penny-pinching when it’s my own life on the line. There’s 100 silver coins in this pouch. Could I ask you to discuss with the party of adventurers whether they’re all right taking this job on for that sum? I don’t mind paying more if necessary.”

“A-A *hundred*?! And you can pay *more*?! A hundred silver coins for an escort mission...” Emille gasped in wonder. “Do you mind if I ask what your job is?”

“I’m a merchant,” I told her. “I only just recently started in this line of work, though.”

“A merchant?” she queried.

“Yes.”

“A merchant...” she said slowly. “By ‘merchant,’ you mean someone who buys things cheap, then sells them for ten times the price and pockets the profit? That kind of merchant?”

“Uh, it sounds kinda awful when you put it like that, but yes,” I replied.

And that’s when *it* happened. Emille undid her top—not one, not two, not even three, but *four* buttons on her shirt—then ran her hand through her hair and brushed it to one side. She grabbed hold of my hand and looked at me through bleary eyes.

“You know, mister...” she said in a velvety voice. “You may not be able to tell just by looking at me, but I *love* rich people.”

“Yeah, I had sort of noticed that. From the start, actually,” I said. “In fact, I’d go as far as to say it doesn’t really matter which angle I look at you from, it’s instantly obvious that you love money.”

She giggled and stuck her tongue out at me, like a child who’d gotten caught pulling a prank.

“What are you giggling for?” I said, slightly bewildered by this response. “Anyway, back to the topic at hand. Can I ask you to talk over my offer with the party of adventurers you mentioned?”

“If you’re willing to part with that much money, I’m sure it’ll go smoothly. I’ll go discuss it with them. If you come back here tomorrow, I’ll introduce you to the adventurers who accepted your request, all right? Oh, and just in case, please be sure to bring everything you’ll need to go into the forest,” she said as she rebuttoned her shirt.

“Understood. Thank you very much,” I said, and bowed to show my gratitude.

“Oh, I almost forgot!” she said suddenly. “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course,” I said with a nod.

For some reason, Emille came over all bashful. “Could you please tell me your name?”

Oh, that's right. I hadn't introduced myself yet.

"You're right. I completely forgot to tell you my name. My apologies. I'm Shiro Amata. Thank you once again for your help."

I held out my right hand and Emille gripped it firmly.

"Thank you for choosing our guild, mister. Or maybe I should be calling you Shiro?" I could almost hear the heart shape she'd added after my name.

"For some reason, I got really bad shivers when you said my name just then..."

She laughed. "I'm sure it's just your imagination."

"You can keep calling me 'mister' if you like," I said. "Actually, please keep calling me that."

"Jeez. You really don't get girls' feelings, do you, mister?" she said indignantly. The pout had returned, I noticed.

"Sorry about that, Emille. But I really don't..."

"Please call me 'Emi,'" the bunny girl said.

"E-Emi?" I stuttered.

"Yes. Normally, I only let my friends call me that, but..."—she giggled—"But you're rich, mister, so I'll make an exception for you." Again, I could almost hear the heart shape she added on to the end of her sentence. And wait, why was she unbuttoning her shirt again?!

"A-All right, I get it. Just please let go of my hand!" I pleaded with her. "And please, *please* stop undressing!"

"Hey, mister..." Emille said seductively. "Are you free later?"

"I'm not! I'm really, really not!" I said, shaking my head furiously from side to side.

"I'm sure you must have a *little* time for—"

"Well, anyway, I'd better be getting home," I interrupted her. "I'll come back tomorrow. Goodbye!"

“Aw, please wait!” Emille called after me as I darted away. “Mister!”

I ignored her pleas and successfully managed to escape from the building.

Chapter Nine: The Adventuring Party Known as Blue Flash

The next day rolled around—the day Emille had told me she would introduce me to the adventurers who'd be accompanying me into the forest, so I headed back to the Silver Moon guild. I told Aina I'd be keeping the store closed for a little while, but she apparently also had plans, so she was thankful for the time off. I realized it was the first time we'd had consecutive days off since my store's grand opening. I hoped she'd be able to relax and spend some time with her mom. I soon found myself standing outside the guild, and I knocked on the main door.

"I'm coming in..." I said as I nervously opened the door. I was still feeling pretty traumatized from Emille's attempts to seduce me the day before. On this day, however, I found four adventurers in the room with Emille. I figured these must be the guild members who'd accepted my request.

"We've been waiting for you, mister," Emille said, greeting me with a warm smile. It was almost as if she'd turned into a completely different person overnight. "Let me introduce you to your escort!"

She made an exaggerated gesture with her arm as she started the introductions. "These four are some of our finest adventurers, and their silver-ranked party is known as 'Blue Flash.' Their leader is—"

"That'll be me."

The young man who'd just spoken up took a step forward. He had short hair and looked rather dashing. But wait a second. I was pretty sure I'd seen him somewhere before...

"I'm the leader of Blue Flash. The name's Raiya. Emi told us there was some guy who wanted to play pretend at being an adventurer, but I wasn't expecting it to be you," he said, flashing me a smile.

I finally recalled who this young man was. "Oh! You're the adventurer who

bought matches off me when I was just starting out!”

“Oh, you remember me?” Raiya said, seeming impressed. “Well, that’s merchants for you. They never forget a face.”

“Well, how *could* I forget your face?” I said jovially. “You were my first customer.”

“I was?” he said, seeming surprised. “Well, I feel very honored that an able merchant like yourself remembers me.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere,” I joked. “Also, I’m still a relative novice in the merchant business.”

“With those amazing matches of yours? I doubt that’s true,” he disagreed. “But anyway, let’s talk more on it later. Let me introduce you to the rest of the team.”

He started going down the line and introducing his teammates, one by one.

“First up, we have Rolf. He’s a priest.”

“Pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr. Shiro, sir,” Rolf said. “I look forward to traveling with you.”

“Right back at ya, Rolf.”

“Just a warning, though, man: don’t go underestimating him just ‘cause he’s a priest. He’s actually a battle priest, and he’s pretty handy with that big mace. So don’t be fooled by that kind face of his, ‘cause he gets super scary when he’s pissed off,” Raiya explained, then let out a roaring laugh.

A mace, huh? Rolf was pretty muscular and tall to boot—I’d say he was about 190 cm tall, at a guess. His priest robes (I think that’s what you call them?) seemed like they were on the verge of bursting at the seams due to how big his muscles were. I *really* wanted to ask him if they seriously didn’t have a bigger size in the robe shop as a joke, but I managed to bite my tongue, albeit with great difficulty. “*He gets super scary when he’s pissed off.*” Yeah, I could imagine.

“Next up, the one who looks like she’s about to fall asleep is our mage, Nesca,” Raiya said, indicating the girl in a pointy hat who was next in line. He

tapped her on the shoulder, but she didn't react. "Come on, Nesca. Say hi to Shiro," he prompted.

"Hello," she said drowsily.

"N-Nice to meet you, Nesca," I replied.

"Well, as you can probably tell, she's a lady of few words," Raiya explained. "But rest assured, her magic abilities are no joke. She's pretty slow at reciting the incantations, though, so we do worry about her a little sometimes."

"I don't need you to worry about me," she said quietly.

"If it's true you don't, then start working on your casting speed," he shot back.

There was a slight pause. "I'll think about it."

"You always say that, and yet, you never do," Raiya sighed. He lifted his head again and carried on with the introductions. "And finally, here we have—"

"I'm Kilpha, meow!" piped up the young girl who was next in line. She threw back her hood and I immediately noticed the two triangle-shaped ears on the top of her head.

"Your ears!" I blurted out. "A-Are you a cat-girl?!"

"Yes! I'm a cat-sìth, meow!" she replied.

"A cat-sìth!" I exclaimed, my breathing suddenly ragged.

"What's this? Hey, man," Raiya said to me, noticing my reaction. "You got something against cat-people?"

I swiftly shook my head. "No way! How could anyone hate them when they're so *cute*? How in the world could anyone hate cat ears?!"

"O-Oh, is that what you meant?" he said, a little taken aback by my enthusiasm.

"Yes, it is!"

Cat ears were justice. There were a lot of things in the world that might be *considered* "justice," but cat ears were the only things that were *definitely* justice.

“We’ve only just met and you’re calling me cute *already*? You’ll make me blush, meow!” Kilpha said, putting her hands to her cheeks and wiggling from side to side.

“He didn’t call *you* cute, Kilpha,” her leader pointed out, but it looked as if Kilpha hadn’t heard this, as her wiggling continued unabated.

Raiya shot me an apologetic look. “Sorry for doubting you, man. We’ve had a few scumbag clients in the past who complained about us having a cat-person in our party. That’s why your reaction made me wary. Sorry about that.”

“You mean there are people who dislike cat ears? There truly are awful people in this world...” I said, shaking my head.

“Tell me about it,” Raiya agreed. “But yeah, we decided not to accept any more requests from assholes like that.” He proudly pushed out his chest. “After all, the reason we came to this remote little town was ’cause we were tired of those scuzzballs.”

“Meow? Raiya! You didn’t finish my introduction, meow!” Kilpha whined, seemingly having come back to her senses.

“Oh, yeah, you’re right. Sorry, my bad. Um...” Raiya said hesitantly. “Where was I again?”

“Oh, forget it. I’ll do it myself,” Kilpha declared. She cleared her throat and stated, “I’m a ranger, meow. My job is to scout out our surroundings and look for traps.”

“She can fight too, of course,” Raiya added. “She can use both daggers and bows.”

“Wow, that’s impressive,” I said.

“Meow-ha-ha. You can say that again, meow,” she said, proudly puffing out her chest.

“Though her biggest talent is running away from danger,” Raiya quipped.

“Raiya! Don’t say that, meow!” Kilpha chided him.

Everyone in the room fell about laughing at Raiya and Kilpha’s back-and-forth (well, everyone except for Nesca, that is, who looked like she was about to doze

off).

“Well then! Should we head off into the forest?” Raiya suggested. “You all good to go, man?”

“I am,” I confirmed.

“That’s what I like to hear,” Raiya said with a smile on his face. “Let’s get going, then!”

Rolf the muscly battle priest, Nesca the taciturn mage, and Kilpha the ranger. Not forgetting their leader, Raiya the warrior. The four of them made up an adventuring party known as Blue Flash. And I was about to go on my very first adventure with them.

Please let this trip be a safe one, I prayed as we left.



After saying goodbye to Emille, we left the Silver Moon guild and headed for the forest east of town. It was finally time for me to experience the lifestyle of an adventurer. It was just the five of us on this adventure: the four members of Blue Flash plus me, an ordinary civilian. We trekked through the pathless forest in what might have been referred to as a formation, with the ranger with cat ears, Kilpha, leading the way, followed by the party leader, Raiya, who was a little off to one side. I stood in the middle next to the taciturn mage, Nesca, while the final member of our group, the battle priest, Rolf, brought up the rear. By putting the members who could fight at close quarters at the front and rear, it meant they could protect me as we walked. It seemed like a pretty efficient formation, if I did say so myself.

“We’ll try to avoid crossing paths with any monsters as much as possible today, so don’t worry too much, man,” Raiya reassured me.

“Gotcha,” I replied. “Thank you.”

The party leader then turned to the cat-girl up front and said, “We’re counting on you, Kilpha.”

She tee-heed in response. “You can trust me, meow,” she assured all of us, slapping her chest to show how confident she was in her abilities.

Since our purpose for being out here was for me to experience what it was like to be on a real adventure, we had decided our main objective for the day would be to find some medicinal herbs. We would then take them to the town’s doctor and sell them for a profit. From what I’d been told, the doctor was having trouble getting hold of certain ingredients due to this whole thing going down at the Silver Moon guild.

“Hm, we’re not having a lot of luck with these herbs today, are we?” Raiya muttered, starting to sound a little impatient at not finding any.

We weren’t just looking for regular old herbs, though. No, the party wanted to get their hands on superior quality ones, and those only grew in this forest. That’s why they’d decided they wouldn’t waste any time fighting monsters, instead focusing their efforts on gathering the herbs. That’s also a large part of the reason they didn’t mind me tagging along. And so, we wandered around the forest, looking for these superior quality herbs. After about a half day of

walking, we'd managed to find a few regular herbs, but alas, none of the higher quality ones.

"Good grief. These herbs really aren't easy to find, are they?" Raiya remarked. "Well, not much we can do about it. Let's stop here for today. Start setting up camp, guys and gals."

So that's what we did, just as the sun was starting to go down. According to Raiya, stopping and resting before you got too exhausted allowed you to continue searching for longer the next day. Damn, I wished my bald-as-a-coot former boss could've heard that.

"I got wood for the fire, meow!" Kilpha piped up.

"Thanks, Kilpha," Raiya said, then turned to me. "Okay then. Let's use one of those matches of yours to light a fire."

He lit a match and dropped it onto the kindling to get the fire started. Campfires really were romantic, weren't they? For some reason, watching the flames dance immediately made me feel at ease.

"These matches are so good, man," Raiya remarked. "Lighting a fire's never been easier."

"We ought to thank Mr. Shiro for that," Rolf added.

"Oh, don't be silly," I said. "I should be the one thanking you guys for using my products."

My matches were still a crowd-pleaser, it seemed. According to Rolf, the adventurers in Ninoritch had started considering them essential items, both due to their usefulness *and* the profits they could make from reselling them...

"You know, if you went and sold your matches over at the royal capital, you could make a crazy amount of money," Raiya said to me.

"There is a high probability the royal capital's commerce guilds will start noticing you soon enough, Mr. Shiro, sir," Rolf added.

Raiya laughed. "Exactly! Rolf's right. It's only a matter of time before they get wind of your matches. When they do get in contact with you, you should sell the matches to them at a super high price, man."

“What? A high price?” I replied.

“Yep. A *super* high price!” Raiya reiterated. “After all, the royal capital’s merchants are really greedy. And as you’re such a nice dude, they’d swindle you in a second.”

“Huh. Sounds like I need to be careful...” I mused.

We talked at length about my matches until Nesca interrupted us. “Raiya. I’m hungry,” she said matter-of-factly.

Just as she was saying this, Kilpha’s stomach made a growling sound. It appeared both girls were hungry.

“We walked a lot today, didn’t we?” Raiya said. “Well then. Time to eat!”

“Yay!” Kilpha exclaimed. “I’m super hungry, meow!”

And with that, it was dinnertime. The four of them took various items of food out of their rucksacks, such as dried meat and some rather tough-looking bread. *Huh. Well, that’s to be expected, I suppose, I thought. After all, adventurers spend most of their time out in the great outdoors, so it stands to reason their meals would be pretty basic.*

As I sat staring at them, deep in thought, Kilpha suddenly said to me, “Hm? Didn’t you bring any food, Shiro, meow?”

She sounded worried and promptly tore her dried meat in half with her teeth.

“Want half of mine?” she offered.

I quickly shook my head. “Oh, no, it’s fine. I’ve brought my own food, so don’t worry about me.”

“Oh, I see. Thank goodness!” Kilpha sighed with relief. “I was scared I might lose half my dinner, meow.”

“Sorry for the misunderstanding,” I said. “I was just wondering what adventurers usually ate.”

“Well, there’s not a whole lot you can eat while on the move,” Raiya replied. “That doesn’t just go for adventurers, though. The same is true for travelers and merchants.”

“Mr. Raiya is right. We can sometimes pick up supplies if our mission takes us someplace where that’s possible, but the majority of the time, we have to rely on preserved foods while we’re out adventuring,” Rolf added, showing me the dried meat and rock-hard bread he had in his hands.

“That looks really tough to eat,” I commented, giving my honest opinion.

Raiya simply shrugged. “That’s because it’s dehydrated. But wait a second...” he said slowly. “Haven’t you brought the same kinds of things with you?”

“Not quite. Let me show you,” I said as I reached into my rucksack and produced the food I’d brought with me: some packaged takikomi gohan—a Japanese dish consisting of rice plus a few other ingredients—as well as some bread, cookies, chocolate, a handful of nutrition bars, a few different types of canned food, and last but not least, my favorite brand of cup noodles, Tonbei. All of these things were sold at most hardware stores around Japan as emergency food in case of natural disasters.

“Is that food?” Nesca asked, looking puzzled. She took one of my still-wrapped chocolate bars and brought it up to her nose to sniff it.

“Yes, it is. Look,” I said as I opened one of the tins and showed them what was inside. They all stared into the tin. “That’s chicken simmered in soy sauce. I also have a few sweet snacks, like cookies and chocolate. Oh, and that there is...”

I showed them every single item of food in my emergency rations. I prepared the takikomi gohan and the cup noodles by adding some boiling water to them, and took the bread out of its packaging, so that everyone could take a good look at it. All four of them seemed absolutely amazed at all these food items they’d never seen before. Nesca even started drooling. So she was a little bit of a glutton, huh? I hadn’t expected that.

“Hey, man, you gonna eat all this by yourself?” Raiya asked.

I had a lot of food in front of me. There was no way I’d be able to eat it all on my own. “Of course not. I brought enough for everyone,” I said.

“For everyone, you say?”

“Yes. To tell you the truth, these are actually products I’m planning on selling in my store. If you don’t mind, I’d like all four of you to try them and tell me

what you think.”

“Well, that won’t be a problem!” Raiya said happily. “Hey, everyone, you heard the guy. Let’s dig in! We need to help him out, after all!”

Kilpha let out a little squeal of delight. “Thank you, Shiro, meow!”

“The gods will surely repay you for your kindness, Mr. Shiro, sir,” Rolf stated.

“I want to eat this,” Nesca said as quietly as always.

They all reached for the food.

“Wh-What *is* this thing?” Raiya stammered after sampling the cup noodles. “You said it was called ‘Tonbei,’ right? What flavor! How can it be this good?!”

“So good!” Kilpha piped up after trying the food she had in her hands. “Shiro, this is so good, meow!”

“This bread is so soft,” Rolf remarked. “I have never tasted anything this delicious, even at the sanctuary.”

“This is sweet,” Nesca said. “It’s good. Shiro, I want more.”

Well, it would appear their first impressions of the food I’d brought over from my world could be summed up in one word: delicious. By the time we were all done eating, the sun had gone down and the two moons were rising.

“Ah, I’m full!” Raiya said, sounding satisfied. “That’s the first time I’ve been able to eat to my heart’s content while out on an adventure.”

“Me too, me too!” Kilpha agreed. “I’m stuffed too, meow!”

“Chocolate. Sweet snack. I will remember it,” Nesca said quietly.

“This must be a blessing from God,” Rolf stated in hushed awe.

All of the food I’d brought with me had received positive reviews from my traveling companions. I told them I wanted to know which one they thought would be the most useful to adventurers, though I said they didn’t have to give me an answer straight away. That was a job for another day. Kilpha slapped her chest like before and declared “Leave it to us!” but I was a little worried about the drool that was seeping out of the side of her mouth just thinking about the food.

Now that we were done eating, it was time to hit the hay. We weren't out here for fun, so we decided to turn in early for the night instead of messing around doing other stuff.

"Rolf, Kilpha, and I will take turns keeping watch. Shiro and Nesca, you guys can sleep," Raiya informed us.

Keeping watch was a very important duty, as the monsters that roamed the forest could decide to attack us at any time during the night, and it wasn't the kind of task a beginner like me or the perpetually sleepy Nesca would have been suited to. Or at least, that's what Raiya told me.

"I'll keep watch first," Raiya stated. "Then it'll be Rolf's turn, and finally, Kilpha's."

"Understood," Rolf said with a nod.

"Gotcha!" Kilpha said enthusiastically.

Each member of the party took a blanket out of their bag and wrapped it around themselves. Kilpha and Nesca lay down on the ground, while Raiya and Rolf propped themselves up against a tree.

"Hm? You can go to bed too, man," Raiya said to me.

Well, it was nice of him to say I could, but it was only eight in the evening. I may have been weary from all that trudging through the forest, but there was no way I'd be able to fall asleep this early, considering I always went to bed after midnight.

I laughed. "I'm not really used to going to bed at such an early hour."

"That so?" the leader of the group remarked. "Well, I guess as a merchant with tons of money, you can stay up late every day, huh?"

"Why? What's the link between staying up late and having money?" I queried.

"Well, if you're up in the middle of the night, you need candles or lamps or maybe even magic tools to be able to see anything, right? And all of those things are pretty expensive. The only people who can afford to do that on the regular—other than tavern owners, of course—are nobles and rich merchants."

"Oh, I see!" I said, automatically whacking the palm of my hand with my fist.

Since I came from Japan with all its modern infrastructures, I had a tendency to forget these things, but in this world, light sources were a little on the expensive side. That also went some way to explaining why Aina was such an early riser. Even such a simple realization made this whole trip worthwhile, in my opinion.

“Well, if you can’t sleep, wanna chat for a bit?” Raiya suggested.

“I’m learning a lot just by talking to you, so that would be great,” I said. “But won’t I be bothering you if I chat to you while you’re meant to be guarding the camp?”

“If having a conversation was enough to make me lower my guard, I wouldn’t be a very good adventurer. But I’ve been one for twelve years now. And you know what that means, right?” he asked with a smirk.

“That you’re a veteran,” I answered, returning the smile. “Right?”

“Precisely.”

He went on to tell me that he always got so bored when he had to keep watch by himself, and would much rather have someone to talk to, who could keep him company to stave off the tedium. I asked him if the two of us nattering away might prevent the others from sleeping, but Raiya told me that no adventurer would be bothered by it. And if they *were*, they should probably consider a career change. Being an adventurer seemed like a pretty tough job. So I decided to stay up and chat with Raiya until I was tired enough to fall asleep.

“Hang on a second,” I said, realizing something. “Adventurers don’t use sleeping bags?”

“No, we don’t. They’re warm and all, but a sleeping bag restricts movement, which can be an issue in an emergency. Most of us just sleep wrapped up in a blanket or a cloak. Take a look at the other three.”

“You’re right...” I said, looking at the rest of the party. “But don’t you get cold with just a blanket over you? It’s a pretty warm night tonight, but...”

“Well, yeah. It’s not an issue right now, but in winter, it gets so cold, you can freeze to death if you don’t have a fire going to keep you warm. But bringing

more blankets means more things to carry around, so..." He shook his head to show his annoyance and sighed. "If only one of us could use the Inventory skill, we wouldn't have to worry about it."

Wait, had he just said "Inventory skill"? This was the perfect opportunity for me to learn more about it! I couldn't let this chance pass me by!

"The 'Inventory skill'?" I asked, feigning ignorance.

"Yeah. Being a merchant, you must know about it, right?" Raiya said. "Apparently only one in ten thousand people can use it. Or was it a hundred thousand? Either way, that skill."

"Ah, I-I've heard rumors, yeah..." I stammered.

"It must be so nice having that skill..." Raiya sighed. "If only one of us had it, we'd never have to miss a meal again. Did you know that there's apparently a book called the 'Book of Inventory' in a dungeon somewhere? I hear it's a relic from the ancient magic civilization era."

"I-I wonder how much it'd sell for if someone found it," I said.

Raiya laughed. "Are you sure you're a merchant? This is an Inventory skill book we're talking about here! Obviously it'd depend on the inventory capacity that specific book would grant you, but even if it just allowed you to carry the equivalent of what you could pack onto a horse-drawn cart, you'd be able to sell it for enough money to buy a noble's mansion!"

For real?! My skill was really that amazing? Keeping it a secret really had been a smart decision. Go, me! Maybe next time I used it, I should try to find out exactly how much inventory space I had.

I carried on chatting with Raiya and ended up learning a lot about this world. Before I knew it, the two moons were high in the sky, and tiredness had finally caught up to me.

"Thank you for telling me all of these things I didn't know," I said to Raiya. "I'm starting to feel really sleepy now, so I'm turning in."

"Sure thing, man," he replied. "I'll wake you up in the morning, so—"

He stopped talking abruptly. He stood up and grabbed his sword in one swift

motion.

“R-Raiya?” I said, unnerved.

“Shhh! Keep quiet!” he hissed.

He was acting weird, almost as if he was wary of something... Wait! No way!

“Crud. I can sense it getting closer. Kilpha, Rolf, get up,” he called to his fellow party members, before glancing over at me. “Hey, man, sorry to ask you to do this for me, but can you go get Nesca? She’s a pain to wake up.”

“Sure,” I said with a nod. I walked over to Nesca and gave her a little shake.

“Chocolate,” she muttered sleepily. “So good...”

“Nesca,” I said, raising my voice a little. “Stop dreaming about chocolate and wake up! Looks like we’ve got an emergency.”

There was a pause and then: “Hm? Shiro?”

“Yeah, it’s me,” I confirmed. “Get up!”

“He’s telling the truth, Nesca,” Raiya called over to her. “Wake up and get ready to use your magic, please.”

“All right,” she replied, slowly getting to her feet.

The other two, Kilpha and Rolf, were already up and had their weapons at the ready.

“Kilpha, can you identify what it is?” Raiya asked the cat-girl. Her nose twitching, Kilpha sniffed the air, before shaking her head.

“I can’t, meow,” she said. “I think it’s approaching from downwind, so I can’t smell it at all, meow.”

“Sounds like we have a rather intelligent monster on our hands,” Rolf commented, gripping his mace tightly.

And that’s when it happened. I suddenly heard a rustling noise from the bushes behind us. I turned around instinctively and found myself looking at a giant bear.

“Damn,” Raiya breathed. “Out of everything it could’ve been, did it really

have to be a murder grizzly?”

All four members of Blue Flash had seen the bear by this point, and all of them bar none had grim expressions on their faces. The bear in front of us was absolutely massive—twice the size of the brown bear specimen I’d seen in the natural history museum back home. Judging by the deadly serious expressions on everyone’s faces, I unfortunately immediately understood how much danger we were in.

“A murder grizzly...” Raiya repeated. “That’s way too tough for silver-ranked adventurers like us.”

The ‘murder grizzly’ (as they called it) was down on all fours, completely still, and about ten meters in front of us. It almost looked like it was sizing us up.

“Mr. Raiya, sir, what should we do?” Rolf asked, looking to his leader for instructions.

“There’s nothing we *can* do,” Raiya replied. “No matter what we do, we can’t beat that thing at our current rank. I’d suggest running away as fast as our legs can carry us, but...”

“That won’t work,” Rolf said. “I’ve heard murder grizzlies are incredibly fast runners. It would catch up to us humes in no time flat. The only one who might be able to escape is Kilpha, since she’s a cat-sith.”

“I would never escape by myself and leave my comrades behind, meow!” Kilpha piped up.

“But even if we fight, we’ll lose,” Rolf told her.

Kilpha ground her teeth angrily, then made a noise of pure frustration.

“Damn it,” Raiya spat. “Just look at the size of that thing. It could almost gobble all five of us down in one bite. And check out the color of its fur. I guess it must be a subspecies of monster grizzly.”

Kilpha and Nesca stiffened up at this.

“I don’t wanna get gobbled up, meow!” Kilpha whined.

“Me neither,” Nesca said quietly.

“And you think I do?” Raiya said. “Lemme think.” He paused. “If we run away, it’ll come after us, but if we try to fight it, we’ll lose for sure. What should we do?”

“One of us should stay and fight to give the others time to escape,” Rolf stated.

“Yeah, I don’t see any other solution...” Raiya said slowly.

Rolf and Raiya glanced at each other and nodded. It looked as if they’d known that had been the only solution from the start.

Question time! In this situation, who do you think would be most likely to be chosen as the decoy? The answer is: me. After all, the members of Blue Flash were all good friends, meaning I was the outsider here. They surely wouldn’t feel too bad about it if some random guy they’d only just met got eaten alive by a bear. That had been the only solution from the start.

“Hey, man...” a pretty depressed-looking Raiya called over to me.

I knew what he was going to say, but I still asked, “What’s up?”

“Act as a decoy to distract the murder grizzly for us, will ya?” That’s what he was going to say. Or so I thought...

“Rolf and I are gonna try to distract this bear. Go with Kilpha and Nesca, and try to get as far away from here as possible. Oh, and Nesca tends to fall over a lot, so if that happens, help her up, okay? I won’t be there to do it, so...” he trailed off with a pained look on his face. “I’m leaving her in your hands, man.”

I hadn’t been expecting that. It felt strangely anticlimactic.

Raiya shot me an awkward smile before taking his place next to Rolf. “Sorry about this, Rolf.”

“Don’t be. You and I have been comrades for a long time now, Mr. Raiya, sir,” Rolf replied.

“Thank you for sticking with me to the bitter end,” Raiya said to his friend.

“When you saved me that fateful day, I made up my mind that I would one day lay down my life for you.” Rolf let out a breathy laugh. “Though I didn’t expect that day to come so soon.”

“Tell me about it!” Raiya said. “I was wondering when something like this would happen, but I didn’t think it would be right now.”

“You and me both,” Rolf agreed.

“Well, I guess we did kinda sign up for this when we chose to become adventurers. Nesca,” he called over to the drowsy-looking girl. “Take care of yourself, you hear? Kilpha, get her and our client somewhere safe, all right?”

“I will,” said Kilpha, who was on the verge of tears. “I’ll protect them for both of you, meow. Don’t you worry about that.”

“I will stay and fight too,” Nesca said quietly.

“Don’t be silly,” Raiya said to her gently. “You’re too slow. You’d just get in the way. Let me do this, okay? Let me go out looking cool in front of the girl I like.”

“Idiot,” Nesca sniffed, glaring at Raiya with her eyes full of tears.

Raiya simply smiled mischievously at her. “Well then. Once I start attacking this brute, you guys run, okay? Rolf, get ready to cast Heal. Oh, and pray I don’t die in a single hit.”

“Understood,” Rolf said with a nod, before starting to recite a prayer.

But then all of a sudden, there was another rustling sound from behind us. I turned around to see what was making it.

“Uh, Rolf...” Kilpha called over to her teammate. “Another one showed up, meow.”

She was right. A second murder grizzly had appeared right behind us. Everyone’s faces fell. We had a murder grizzly in front of us and a murder grizzly behind us. We were hemmed in.

“No way! Seriously, what the hell?!” Raiya yelled angrily.

“Miss Kilpha, ma’am,” Rolf addressed the cat-girl. “Prepare to leave at once. Mr. Raiya and I will deal with the—”

“It’s impossible,” Nesca interrupted him. “It’s over. We’re all going to die here.”

The situation seemed utterly hopeless. A growl filled the air, and the murder grizzly in front of us started padding slowly toward us. The one behind us didn't move, almost as if its sole reason for being there was to stop us from escaping. Raiya gripped his sword in both hands and bent his knees slightly.

The murder grizzly drew closer.

Kilpha squeezed Nesca's hand tightly, and shifted her weight so she'd be ready to run if she spotted an opportunity to flee.

The murder grizzly drew closer.

Still reciting his prayers, Rolf raised his head.

The murder grizzly drew closer.

"If I'm not mistaken..." I muttered to myself. Just as the situation was getting more and more nerve-racking by the second, I opened my rucksack and started rummaging around inside it.

"What are you *doing*, man?!" Raiya panicked. "Don't move yet! The murder grizzly's gonna target you!"

But I ignored him and kept searching through my bag until I finally found what I'd been looking for. "Here they are!" I exclaimed.

I quickly lit a match and fumbled with it before tossing the things I'd taken out of my bag in the direction of the murder grizzlies. A loud crackling sound could instantly be heard as the things I'd chucked hit the ground. I'd decided to throw firecrackers at the beasts, you see, which were commonly used in Hokkaido—a region prone to bear attacks—as a way to repel bears. Both murder grizzlies started backing away, the loud crackling sound taking them by surprise.

All right, I thought. I've managed to put a bit of distance between us and them.

"Now, try this on for size!" I shouted.

With my companions watching my every move, I took a spray can out of my rucksack and pointed the nozzle at the murder grizzly in front of us. The distance between the beast and me was roughly five meters. Without taking its eyes off me, the murder grizzly started padding toward me once more, but I

didn't falter. No, on the contrary: I took a step forward.

"Murder grizzly!" I yelled at the lumbering beast. "I'm gonna make you regret ever coming across me! Fire!"

I removed the safety pin from the nozzle of the spray can and pressed the button on the top.

Pssst!



Reddish powder immediately spewed forth from it, right into the bear's face. The beast let out a loud cry, which was so high-pitched, it might have been better described as a shriek. I swiveled on my heels, and pressed the button on the spray can once more—this time, taking aim at the beast behind us. It also screamed in agony. Both murder grizzlies were left writhing around on the ground, desperately rubbing their faces and noses in the dirt and making a lot of confused growling noises. Needless to say, the four members of Blue Flash were flabbergasted by what they'd just witnessed.

"That worked amazingly well! If this were a game, you might even say I'd gotten a critical hit," I whispered to myself.

"Hey, man..." Raiya breathed, his voice trembling as he stared in disbelief at the bears writhing around on the ground. "What the hell was that?"

"This? Oh, nothing too impressive," I said modestly. "I just used some poisonous mist to make the bears—you called them 'murder grizzlies,' right? Well, I made it so they're now unable to see or smell."

"What?! Poisonous mist?" he exclaimed. "You can use *magic*?"

"No, of course not. It wasn't magic. I just used an item. Here, take a look," I said, showing him the spray can I was holding in my right hand. The label read "Magnum Blaster: Bear Deterrent." Though of course, this was written in Japanese, meaning Raiya couldn't read it.

"What is it?" Raiya asked.

"This item contains a sort of poisonous mist, and if you point it in the direction you want to aim it and press this button, it comes out," I explained. "What do you think? Pretty amazing, right?"

"Poisonous mist..." he repeated, completely awestruck. "So *that's* why the murder grizzlies seem to be in so much pain."

"Yeah, exactly," I said with a grin.

Before setting out from my world, I'd put a can of bear deterrent in my bag, just in case. I hadn't really expected I would actually need to use it and I *definitely* hadn't expected it to work as well as it had, but as they say,

prevention is better than cure, and all that jazz.

“Anyway, we should hurry up and get out of here,” I said, getting ready to run, but Raiya stopped me.

“Wait a minute, man! You said the murder grizzlies’ noses don’t work now ‘cause of your poison thing, right?”

“Yeah. And?” I asked.

Raiya smirked at me. “That means we can beat the hell out of these guys now! There’s no way *any* adventurer would pass up an opportunity like this! Rolf, Kilpha, get over here! Nesca, start casting some offensive magic.”

“Coming, meow!” Kilpha exclaimed.

“Understood,” Rolf said.

“Time for retribution,” Nesca announced quietly.

The tense atmosphere from earlier had dissipated entirely. And just like that, the Blue Flash adventuring party defeated the poor bears who still hadn’t recovered their sight or sense of smell.

“Hell yeah!” Raiya bellowed in triumph.

I suddenly remembered something and turned to him. “Oh, by the way, Raiya. Is it true you like Nesca?”

He didn’t answer, but both he and Nesca went as red as a tomato.

According to my companions, murder grizzly loot went for a good price in town.

“Mr. Raiya, sir, please remove the beast’s fur,” Rolf instructed his party leader.

“Can do,” Raiya replied.

“Miss Kilpha, ma’am, could you take care of its fangs?” Rolf asked. “Oh, and Miss Nesca, ma’am, if you don’t mind, please drain its blood into a leather bag and freeze it using your ice magic.”

“Sure thing, meow!” Kilpha said cheerfully.

“Understood,” came Nesca’s quiet response.

And that’s how three of my traveling companions came to be dissecting the murder grizzlies while Rolf oversaw the whole thing. It was a pretty gory sight.

“All righty, I’m done with the fur,” Raiya said. “Moving on to the claws next.”

“Hey, Raiya?” Kilpha said.

“What is it, Kilpha?” he replied.

“What should I do with the nuts, meow?”

I definitely hadn’t been expecting to hear such crudeness coming out of a young woman’s mouth. My traveling companions, on the other hand, didn’t seem the least bit fazed by her question.

“Well, we’re gonna sell those too. Right, Rolf?” Raiya said, turning to the priest for confirmation.

“Indeed. Murder grizzly testicles are used in certain types of medicine. Please be sure to pack them as well.”

“Okay!” Kilpha said jovially, then brought her dagger up to poor Mr. Bear’s scrotum and snip-snipped off his balls. The sight made my own nether regions twinge.

The minutes passed as my adventuring companions did a thorough job of dissecting the beast. There were two murder grizzlies, so once they’d finished with the first one, they moved on to the second, cutting off and packing all the loot they needed, until all that was left of the two bears was their bones and flesh.

“All right, should we call it here? We’re all out of storage space anyway,” Raiya said.

The other three nodded. All of their bags were bulging with murder grizzly loot.

“Hey, man, I need to ask you something,” Raiya said as he walked up to me with an apologetic look on his face, scratching his head. “I know it’s kind of a big thing to ask, but can we end this particular adventure here and head back to civilization?”

“Well, we *did* have an unexpected run-in with some pretty big creatures...” I said. “But what about those ‘superior quality herbs’ you guys were looking for?”

“Thanks to you, we defeated two murder grizzlies. Usually, only gold-ranked adventurers are able to kill those, you know?” Raiya explained. “The loot we got from these big guys is way more valuable than superior quality herbs. That’s why we’d like to get out of this forest and sell it before any of it starts rotting.”

I laughed. “That makes sense, yeah.”

In normal times, the Adventurers’ Guild would purchase all the loot their adventurers had acquired, but given the Silver Moon’s dire financial situation at that moment in time, they weren’t going to be buying anything. The Blue Flash crew had another plan, though: they were going to head to another town and sell their loot there. They’d planned on getting Nesca to use her magic to freeze everything so that they could carry it all to the next big town. Adventurers really were strong-willed.

“Sorry about this, man. Of course, if you say it’s okay for us to go, we won’t charge you for today, since we’re the ones cutting the adventure short. And well, if it’s too much of an issue, you can always refuse our request,” Raiya said with a serious look on his face. “But considering half of the loot is yours, don’t you also wanna head into town to sell it? You *are* a merchant, after all.”

“Wait, what?” I said, taken aback. “What do you mean, half of the loot is mine? I didn’t do anything!”

“What the heck are you talking about? If it hadn’t been for you and your items, we’d all be dead right now. Not to mention, those items were seriously amazing, so they must have cost quite a lot in the first place, right?” Raiya said, and his partymates all nodded.

It seemed that, in this world, battle-oriented items were pretty valuable, and I remembered being told that even low-quality, single-use attack magic scrolls sold for dozens of silver coins. That explained why Raiya assumed my bear deterrent spray full of “poisonous mist” must have cost a lot.

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” I said, laughing and waving my hands in front of me to indicate it seriously wasn’t a big deal. “No item can replace a human life.”

“Man...” Raiya said, slapping my shoulder hard. “You really are one of the good guys! You sure you’re a merchant? You’re too nice for your own good!”

I laughed. “I get that a lot. I’m really not your typical merchant, am I?”

“You said it! But personally, I like guys like you much better. Don’t you agree, gang?” Raiya directed this question at the rest of his party.

“Yeah! I like you a lot, meow!” Kilpha purred.

“I also think you’re a good person,” Nesca agreed drowsily.

“I am of the opinion that, if all those other merchants were like you, the world would be a much kinder place,” Rolf said charitably.

Aw, stop it, you guys! You’re gonna make me blush! Besides, that bear deterrent spray had only been 8,000 yen a can, which was about 80 copper coins in this world. It really wasn’t that expensive.

“Anyway, I completely get why you want to head back to civilization,” I said, changing the topic in order to hide my embarrassment. “And I have no reason to refuse. Actually, I feel pretty bad for you guys. Seems to me that selling all this loot is gonna be quite tedious.”

“If only the Silver Moon guild had money, they would’ve bought it all off us, but...” Raiya trailed off. “Oh well. It’s a pretty common issue in remote towns like Ninoritch.” He laughed as if to show it was no big deal.

If only the Silver Moon guild were run properly, my traveling companions wouldn’t have to endure such unnecessary hardships. Hopefully, there’d soon be a new Adventurers’ Guild in town that would be able to properly support all the adventurers in the area, but in the meantime...

“Raiya,” I said to catch his attention.

“What’s up, dude?”

“Want me to carry the murder grizzly loot?” I suggested.

The members of Blue Flash *had* been willing to lay down their lives just so I could escape, after all. I definitely owed them one.

“You?” he queried, then burst out laughing. “Don’t go saying funny things like

that out of the blue, man! Thanks for the offer, though. I do appreciate the gesture, but I think your arms might be a little on the skinny side to be up to the task.”

“Ah, please don’t call ’em ‘skinny’! I’m actually quite self-conscious about my arms...”

He laughed again. “Sorry, my bad.”

“You’re right. I’m not very strong. But...” I said tentatively, “I’ve actually been keeping something from you guys. Just...” I paused, “take a look at this.”

I turned around and walked over to what was left of the bears, then in a clear voice, I said, “Activate Inventory skill.”

More than 1,000 kilograms of bear meat and other materials instantly disappeared into my inventory. Once again, the members of Blue Flash were utterly dumbfounded by what they’d just witnessed.

“Meow?” said an open-mouthed Kilpha. “Shiro, you have the Inventory skill, meow?”

“I do, yeah,” I replied with a small nod. “I didn’t tell you guys since it’s such a rare skill. Sorry for keeping it a secret until now.”

“Please don’t apologize, Mr. Shiro, sir,” Rolf said. “It was a very wise decision. You are a merchant, after all, and if knowledge of it had gotten out, it might have caused needless complications for you.”

“Rolf’s right,” Nesca sleepily agreed.

“Well, you heard the man,” Raiya said to me. “You’ve got nothing to apologize for. Plus, you *literally* saved our lives. In fact, on that point, as the leader of Blue Flash, there’s something I’d like to say to you.” Raiya came closer and bowed deeply to me. “Thank you so much for saving the lives of my comrades. Seriously, thank you. We owe you our lives.”

“Mr. Shiro, sir, allow me to thank you as well,” Rolf said.

“Me too! Thank you so, so much, Shiro!” Kilpha chirped.

“Thank you, Shiro,” Nesca chimed in, sounding as sleepy as ever. “I’ll never forget what you did for us.”

They all bowed as one and I could feel my cheeks getting hot again. “Okay, okay, guys, I got it! I swear I got it! So you can all stop bowing now!”

“All right,” Raiya said, instantly straightening up. “Well, I do feel a little bad about it, but if you insist...” he said reluctantly, going back to what we’d been talking about previously. “Can we let you handle the loot?”

Adventurers sure were quick to move on to the next topic, weren’t they? “Of course. I can take care of it.”

“It’s so great you have the Inventory skill, though!” Raiya added. “It’s gonna be super helpful.”

Everyone handed me all of the murder grizzly loot they’d scavenged and I put it all in my inventory. “Should we head back to Ninoritch, then?” I asked.

Raiya laughed. “What are you talking about, man? Now that you’ve put all the loot in your inventory and our packs are empty again, this is the perfect time to go looking for medicinal herbs! Right, guys?” he said to his troupe, who duly nodded in agreement.

I hadn’t been expecting that, but I wasn’t about to start complaining. All in all, my little trial adventure lasted for another two days.



We got back to Ninoritch on the evening of the third day. I was busy inwardly celebrating the fact we’d managed to make it home safe when I suddenly heard a little voice call out to me from the town gate.

“Ah! Mister Shiro!”

It was Aina. She’d been sitting on a log waiting at the town gate, and as soon as she saw me, she immediately got to her feet and ran over to me.

When she reached me, she looked up into my face and trilled a happy greeting. “Welcome back, Mister Shiro!”

“Hi, Aina,” I said, returning her greeting. She giggled and grabbed my hand with a smile on her face. It seemed she wanted us to hold hands.

“Yo, man, is that your daughter?” Raiya asked when he saw the two of us acting all chummy.

I heard Kilpha let out a pretty fake-sounding wail from somewhere behind me. “I can’t believe it! You called me ‘cute’ even though you have a daughter, meow?” she mewled, punctuated by some overly-exaggerated sobs. Poor little Aina must have been utterly confused by this reaction.

“Come on, you guys, she’s not my daughter. She just helps me out at my shop. Her name’s Aina,” I explained.

“Oh, okay. Sorry for assuming, man,” Raiya said before crouching down to Aina’s level. “Hi there, girly. I’m an adventurer. The name’s Raiya. We’re probably gonna swing by your boss’s shop pretty often, so I reckon we’ll probably end up crossing paths quite a lot.”

“Okay! Uh...” Aina suddenly looked a bit unsure of herself. “Wait, what was I meant to say again? Ah! W-We look forward to your patronage!”

Raiya laughed. “Aw, look at you! What a polite little merchant! I hope you take good care of her, man.”

“Of course I do,” I confirmed.

“All righty, time we headed over to the Silver Moon guild to tell Emi we’re back, then we’re all good. Can you hang with us a little longer, man?”

“Sure thing,” I said with a nod, before turning to the little girl beside me. “Aina, I have to go to the Adventurers’ Guild real quick. Can you go wait for me at the shop?”

“Okay!” the little girl chirped happily.

“Wait a second,” I said as I rummaged through my backpack. “Ah, here it is.” I handed her the key to the shop.

“I’ll be waiting for you at the shop, Mister Shiro!” she said, then headed off in the direction of my store.

“Let’s go, dude,” Raiya called over to me, and we started off toward the Silver Moon guild.

“Hey, Emi! We’re back! Job’s done!” Raiya called out as the four members of Blue Flash and I triumphantly entered the guild.

It’d already been three days since I was last here, huh? I looked around and...

“Please! Please just give me a little more time to get the money!” Emille begged. She was kowtowing in front of an old man I’d never seen before.

What the heck was going on?

Chapter Ten: The Silver Moon Crisis

"I just need a little more time..." Emille pleaded, still on the ground. "I-I should have it by next month!"

"He's a loot merchant," Raiya whispered to me.

"Loot merchant? You mean he buys up the guild's monster loot?" I asked.

"Yep. I've seen him here a couple of times, so I'm pretty sure that's who he is."

"Huh," was my only response to this. So the man Emille was bowing to was a loot merchant, was he?

His arms crossed, he looked down at Emille with cold eyes. "'Next month, next month,' you say. What guarantee do I have that your guild will even still exist then?"

"Uh..." Emille hesitated. "Well, that's..."

"I've been waiting for you to repay the 10 gold coins you owe me for six months now. I'm not leaving until you hand them over," he declared.

"It's just..." Emille started, "the guild's in a bit of a tight spot at the moment, and—"

"That doesn't concern me at all. At any rate, you're not the one I should be speaking to, Miss Emille. Where is Guildmaster Brott? Get him out here. I want to speak to him directly," the loot merchant demanded.

Emille's face fell, and she muttered something that ended in "town."

"Excuse me?"

"He skipped town," Emille repeated, sounding deflated.

The man was silent for a moment, before finally letting out an incredulous "What?"

"The old fart skipped town!" the bunny girl raged. "He stuffed his pockets

with all of the guild's money and then, poof! He was gone!"

The merchant just stared at her with his jaw on the floor. *Yup, been there, done that*, I found myself thinking. When Karen had told me the news, I'd been in a similar state of shock. After a few seconds of stunned silence, he finally regained his senses.

"So what you're basically telling me..." the loot merchant said slowly, "...is you don't have any money at all right now. Is that right?"

"Y-Yes. We don't even have a single copper coin we can give you at the moment."

"Not even a copper coin, huh?" he mused. "Well, doesn't matter. Even if you don't have any money, you must still have some monster loot, right? I'll take that as payment instead. Go bring me enough monster loot to cover your debt."

"Actually, we don't have any loot either..." the bunny girl said cautiously.

"Oh, *please*. If you're going to lie to me, at least put a little effort into it and make it halfway believable." He chuckled. "A guild with no monster loot? That's absurd—"

"Emille's telling the truth."

The words had left my mouth before I'd even realized I'd opened it. I couldn't help it. I knew Emille wasn't lying. There was no way I could just stand there and turn a blind eye to this situation.

"And who, may I ask, are *you*?" the loot merchant said, turning toward me.

"A client," I said matter-of-factly. "I entrusted this guild with a job."

"A client, you say?" He squinted as he looked me up and down. "If that's true, how would *you* know about the guild's internal affairs?"

"Everyone in town knows," Raiya said, stepping forward and answering for me. "It's been the talk of the town, y'know? 'The Silver Moon guild's got no money left.' I mean, they can't even pay their adventurers anymore! So instead of giving them money, they've been handing out monster loot. That's why there's nothing left."

"That's..." the man said, trailing off. Once again, he was too astonished to

speak.

“Oh, but where are my manners?” I said, addressing the loot merchant again. “I haven’t introduced myself. My name is Shiro. I work as a merchant in this town. If you don’t mind, could you please tell me what happened between you and the guild?” I asked, trying to sound as sympathetic as possible. “Though I can probably guess the gist of it.”

On hearing that I was also a merchant, the man dropped his guard a little. “I suppose I can tell you, one merchant to another. After all, I wouldn’t want you going and spreading horrible rumors about me just because of a simple misunderstanding.”

The man introduced himself as Gerald. He confirmed that he was a merchant who specialized in loot, and he also told us he was a longtime acquaintance of the former guildmaster. When the Silver Moon guild had started having money troubles, he’d agreed to lend the guildmaster 10 gold coins, with the guildhall put up as collateral. Well, that explained why Emille had begged Karen for 10 gold coins. She’d wanted to pay off the former guildmaster’s debt.

“The deadline for repayment passed over six months ago. Can you believe that? Six months!” Gerald spat.

“I’m so sorry!” Emille apologized, sobbing.

“No money, no loot...” he summarized. “So the only thing this guild’s still got is this bunny girl, huh? What a joke! Are you guys trying to take me for a fool?!”

“I’m so, so sorry!” Emille repeated, still wailing loudly.

“I don’t want your apology! Maybe I should stop waiting around to be repaid and just take the title deeds for this property instead,” the man grumbled as he took out a piece of parchment from his breast pocket. “Here, look at this. It clearly states in this contract that this guildhall was put up as collateral and ownership of it will be turned over to me in the event that the guild cannot repay the 10 gold coins I am owed. You can see here that Guildmaster Brott—the owner of this place—signed it. Do you get it now? If you can’t repay what you owe me, this building becomes my property.”

Emille clearly didn’t know what to say to this. It was obvious from her face

that she'd been dreading this exact situation.

"This town may be in the middle of nowhere, but the plot of land this building sits on is quite big. If I sell it, I'll probably be able to recoup a good chunk of my money. And here I thought I was doing a good deed by lending an old friend some money..." he sighed. "What a mistake that was. Besides, it's not cheap, traveling all the way out here, you know? Do you have any idea how expensive the toll is on the road that leads to this place? Anyway, please fetch the title deeds for me, Miss Emille."

"Please! Anything but that!" Emille pleaded.

"You don't get to refuse. Besides, Guildmaster Brott also abandoned you when he fled, didn't he?"

Emille stayed silent.

"I don't understand why you're still so loyal to him," the loot merchant continued. "Why don't you simply leave this place and go find yourself another job? I believe it'd be a more constructive use of your time, wouldn't it?"

I'd asked Emille something similar when we first met. At the time, she hadn't given me a straight answer, deciding to play dumb instead by telling me it was down to "girls' feelings" or something like that. But this situation was a lot more serious, so she couldn't give a silly answer like that this time.

"It's because..." she started after a few seconds of hesitation. "I just have so many memories here. That's why I don't want to lose this place," she explained, verbalizing her true feelings. Her voice was a little hoarse and it sounded like she was trying hard not to cry.

"You have 'so many memories' here, huh? Miss Emille..." Gerald said, a little impatiently. "Are you really refusing to hand over the title deeds because of something so fickle?"

"I hate that old rat too, you know. But..." she said earnestly, "even a bunny girl like me managed to find a home here. I've always been looked down on due to my race, but when I joined this guild, for the first time in my life, I felt like I belonged. That's why I've worked here for so long. Of course, there were ups and downs, and things sometimes got tough, but even so, the good times

slightly outweighed the bad. Anyway, what I'm trying to say is..." She paused for effect. "I like this guild. That's why I don't want to lose it."

I like this guild. Her reasoning was very simple.

"I like this place,' huh?" I mused.

But I got it. When grandma had gone missing a few years back, my parents had wondered what they should do with her house. We organized a big family gathering to figure out what to do with it, and it turned out that everyone was in favor of selling the house. Except for me, that is. I was very much against the idea, but at the time, I was only a student and my parents were still providing for me. Even so, I'd made so many good memories in that house, and I begged and begged my parents not to sell it—even going as far as getting down on my hands and knees. In the end, they didn't sell. I don't know if me pleading with them had influenced their decision at all, but what mattered was grandma's house had stayed in our hands. And years later, I was the person currently living in it. Anyway, the long and short of it is I completely understood how Emille felt.

"Your personal situation is no concern of mine, Miss Emille," Gerald scoffed. "Now hurry up and bring me the title deeds."

"All right..." she said sadly.

Life's cruel. No matter what you do, there are always situations that simply can't be solved.

Emille got up off her knees and slowly walked over to the counter. When she returned, she was clutching a document.

"Here you go," she said, handing it to the loot merchant as tears pooled in her eyes.

"Gah, I can't take it anymore!" I blurted out in frustration. "I'm heading out for a bit. Emille, please hold off on handing over those title deeds for a little while."

"Mister?" Emille stared at me with a confused look on her face as I walked out the door.

As soon as I was outside, I checked to make sure no one was around, and

when I was satisfied I wasn't being watched, I opened up my inventory and took out half of the murder grizzly loot. I grabbed as many valuable items as I could—such as the fur—and when I couldn't carry any more, I headed back inside.

"I've got monster fur here, plus some fangs and claws. Emille, can I sell these to the guild?" I said to the bunny girl.

She looked at the loot I was carrying and a confused "Huh?" escaped her lips. Beside her, Gerald stared at the murder grizzly fur, utterly dumbfounded.

"I-Is that..." he started. "No way..." He gasped. "Is that *murder grizzly* fur?"

"Bingo. This is all murder grizzly loot."

"And look at that color! It can't have been your run-of-the-mill murder grizzly..." the loot merchant said, sounding awestruck. "I-I'll buy it off you! Mr. Shiro, do you think you could see your way to selling it to me?"

"Ah, sorry, Mr. Gerald. I appreciate the offer, but I'd like to sell it to the Silver Moon guild instead," I said, then I turned to Emille. "So what do you say, Emille? Will you buy it from me?"

"Huh? What are you talking about, mister?" the bunny girl said blankly. "The guild is..."

"Yeah, I know. The guild currently doesn't have any funds. Which is why..."—I paused for dramatic effect—"...you don't need to pay me right away. I don't mind waiting for a bit."

"Mister..." Emille whispered. It looked as if she'd finally understood what I was trying to do. Her eyes once again filled with tears.

"Well then, sounds like I've got myself a deal!" I declared. "Please let me know when you've got the money and I'll swing by to collect it."

"Miss Emille, please sell me this loot!" Gerald begged her frantically. "I'll buy it off you for fifteen—no, wait, *sixteen* gold coins!"

He produced a pouch full of gold coins from his breast pocket and dropped it onto the counter with a clink.

Emille wiped her eyes. "Eighteen gold coins," the bunny girl bartered. She was most likely upping the price as payback for the way the previous conversation

had gone, but she sounded levelheaded enough.

“Eigh...” Gerald breathed. “All right, all right,” he said through gritted teeth as he took eight gold coins out of his pouch. “Here. I’ve deducted the 10 gold coins you owe me. Is that fine with you?”

“Of course,” Emille said, taking the coins from him. She looked relieved. You could tell she was glad she hadn’t lost the guildhall.

“Damn, man. You’re way too nice,” Raiya said to me, shaking his head. “There’s no way we can sit on our hands after what you just did.” He turned to Emille and said, “Hey, Emi. We’ve also got some murder grizzly loot. Wanna buy it off us?”

Emille glanced at Gerald, who immediately nodded without saying a word. “Of course,” she chirped.

“Great! Wait right here and I’ll bring it in,” he promised, then he turned to me and said, “Hey, man, can you help me carry it all inside?”

“Sure thing.”

I exited the building with Raiya, and once outside, I took the rest of the monster loot out of my inventory, then the two of us immediately went back inside.

“But unlike this guy, I won’t be saying you can just pay for it whenever. You need to pay for it now, Emi.”

“Of course,” she said.

She sold Raiya’s loot to Gerald for 20 gold coins, which was two more than what he’d bought mine for, though that was probably because Raiya’s half of the loot included the murder grizzlies’ scrotal sacs—or their “nuts,” to borrow Kilpha’s rather crude way of putting it. The guild took a twenty percent commission on all sales, so Raiya ended up receiving 16 gold coins.

Gerald cleared his throat. “Well, I’ll be going, then. I didn’t expect I’d get the chance to purchase murder grizzly loot today. Miss Emille, Mr. Shiro, my very dear adventurers, it’s been an absolute pleasure doing business with you. I look forward to our next transaction,” he said, then left the guildhall.

Emille did a discreet little fist pump. “Our next transaction” presumably meant Gerald planned on coming back to the Silver Moon guild and hoped it would still exist when he did. Emille’s reaction wasn’t all that surprising. She must have been really happy with the outcome.

“Mister...” she gushed. “And you too, Raiya, Rolf, Nesca, and Kilpha...” she said, looking at each of their faces in turn and smiling broadly. “Thank you so very, very much for your help!”

“There’s no need to thank us. This guy’s the one who started it all,” Raiya said, jerking his thumb toward me. “All we did was sell you our loot, like any adventurer would.”

“Raiya’s right,” Nesca agreed. “We just did what we always do.”

“Yup, yup, meow!” Kilpha purred.

“We merely fulfilled our duties,” Rolf added. “Mr. Shiro is the only one worthy of praise here.”

“Even so...” Emille insisted. “You’ve all made me so happy. Thank you so much!”

“Stop it now, Emi,” Raiya said with a laugh. “You don’t even sound like yourself anymore. Anyway, we’re done with the task. Can we do all the final odds and ends and wrap this whole thing up?”

“Sure thing. Wait...” the bunny girl said cautiously. “You mean right now?”

“Yup. That’s why we came here in the first place,” Raiya confirmed. “C’mon, let’s get it over with.”

Emille’s happy expression quickly turned to one of dread. “A-Are you sticking around for this, mister?” she said to me.

“What? Am I not supposed to be here for this bit?” I said blankly.

“Of course you aren’t! This is the Adventurers’ Guild, you know! Your business is concluded, so what are you still doing here?” Emille snapped. She was glaring at me and gesturing for me to get out the same way you would to a pet, as if my presence bothered her.

“Hey, Emi, he’s our client,” Raiya interjected. “He has every right to be here.

And it *was* an escort mission. If you don't see for yourself that the client's made it back in one piece, you can't sign the mission off as being successfully completed, can you?"

"Uh, well, you've got a point there..." Emille said, furtively glancing at my face. "But I've already seen that he's alive and well, so..."

She was fidgeting restlessly. What was wrong with her today?

"Right? He's perfectly fine," Raiya said. "We did our job properly. He hasn't got a single scratch on him!"

"Exactly!" Kilpha piped up. "The worst he got was a scraped knee from when he fell over, meow!"

"Kilpha..." her party leader said with a hint of rebuke in his tone. "Don't mention *that*. It might have an influence on the mission report. Besides, it's Shiro's own fault he fell."

I laughed. "You're right about that. Thanks again for healing me, Rolf."

"There is no need to thank me," Rolf said. "It is my duty to heal my comrades."

I didn't know if he really meant anything by it, but I was happy that Rolf had called me his "comrade."

"Anyway, Emi, can you please proceed with the payment already?" Raiya urged her.

But Emille was looking a little glum. "Uh, well, actually..." she said before trailing off. She was still fidgeting behind the counter.

"Emi..." Raiya said, a slightly ominous undertone in his voice. "Don't tell me you already spent the money that was meant for us. Look, I know we've been friends for a long time, but if you did, I swear we're gonna quit this guild."

"I-I-I-I didn't! I-I have your payment ready!" the bunny girl stammered.

"Then what are you dillydallying for?" Raiya said impatiently. "You owe us 30 silver coins for the three-day mission. C'mon, hurry it up."

"Huh? Thirty?" I queried, somewhat confused.

“What’s wrong, man?” Raiya said. “Don’t go asking me to accept any less than that now, because my answer is a big fat no.”

“No, that’s not the issue...” I said as I looked over at Emille, who immediately averted her gaze.

“Huh? So what’s the problem, man?” Raiya asked me.

“Well, when I paid for this mission, I gave Emille 100 silver coins. But if you’re only asking for 30 coins, does that mean the guild’s keeping the other 70?”

The Blue Flash members were speechless. Without uttering a single word, they all turned and glared at Emille, who seemed even more agitated than before and had the look of someone who wanted to smooth everything over, but couldn’t find the right words to do it. She stood up and sat down a few times, and extended and retracted her arms over and over in some kind of weird, silent dance, which only served to make her look even more suspicious.

“What the hell, Emi?! Explain yourself right now!” Raiya fumed.

“I’m sowwy!” she wailed.

“I’m not gonna let you get away with this!” he roared.

“Mister said he’d pay 100 silver coins, so...” Emille said, trying to explain herself. “So I...”

“I’m going to set the rabbit on fire,” Nesca stated matter-of-factly.

“W-Wait, Nesca! Wait!” the bunny girl pleaded. “Please stop! No, don’t start casting a spell!”

“I’m starting to lose my temper too, meow,” Kilpha said. “Like poof! There it goes.”

“God has decreed that we must punish her,” Rolf added.

Emille screeched in fear. “I promise I won’t do it again!”

“I don’t care. I’m still going to kill you,” Nesca stated.

The members of Blue Flash proceeded to whale on Emille, and it wasn’t long before her pummeled face was so swollen, she was barely recognizable. *It’s a good thing I didn’t bring Aina with us*, I thought as I watched the carnage.

Chapter Eleven: Homecomings and Welcomes

After parting ways with the Blue Flash crew, I was finally able to return to my shop. It had only been a few days since I was last there, and yet, it felt like an eternity. I guess I must have really started getting attached to the place.

“I’m back!” I called out as I crossed the threshold.

“Mister Shiro! Welcome back!” Aina greeted me. She’d been doing a spot of cleaning, but she dropped everything and ran over to the door to greet me as soon as she saw me walk in.

I laughed. “Hi, Aina. I’m back for good this time.”

I sat down on a chair behind the counter and took a deep breath.

“What was it like, being an ad-vent-you-rer for a few days?” Aina asked me.

“It was amazing,” I told her. “Want me to tell you all about it?”

“Yeah!” the little girl exclaimed, seemingly very excited to hear what I’d gotten up to.

“Well then. Story time it is,” I declared. “So we headed off into the forest, and then...”

I started recounting everything that had happened to me in the forest, making sure to exaggerate every single detail to make my adventure sound more interesting.

“And then, Nesca...” I said to a spellbound Aina, who occasionally let out squeals of excitement as I told her about my escapades.

“But then! Out of the blue...” I continued, recounting the perilous situation we had found ourselves in.

“And then? What happened next?!” she asked impatiently. She listened intently to the whole story, her expression changing as required to match the event I was recalling.

“Anyway, long story short, it was a pretty intense three days,” I said, concluding my tale.

She let out the breath she’d been holding. “I didn’t even notice I’d stopped breathing!” she exclaimed. “You’re so amazing, Mister Shiro! You even managed to beat two murder grizzlies!”

“Well, I didn’t. The guys and girls of Blue Flash did that. I just helped them out a little bit.”

“No way!” the little girl insisted. “If you hadn’t been there, they’d all be dead!”

I let out a little chuckle. “Yeah, they said that to me a lot too. Still, I got so scared when I saw how huge those bears were. I’m really glad we all managed to make it home in one piece. Plus, now I have a much better idea of the kinds of items that might interest adventurers. All in all, I’d say my little adventure was a success.”

“That’s great,” Aina trilled with a broad smile on her face, and I couldn’t help mirroring it with a grin of my own.

“Yes, it is,” I said.

In a few days’ time, the inspector from the royal capital guild would be coming to town, which didn’t leave me with a whole lot of time to prepare, but if I ordered some stuff online as well as making a trip to the hardware store, I’d probably just about manage.

“All righty. I’m gonna head on home for a—”

Just as I was getting up out of my chair with a view to making my way back to grandma’s house, I was interrupted by a furious knocking at the door. *Rat-a-tat-tat! Rat-a-tat-tat!*

“Shiro!” a voice yelled through the door. “It’s me, Karen. Are you home?”

Karen? She sounded quite flustered. Had something happened?

I opened the door. “What’s wrong, Kare—”

I didn’t even get to finish my sentence. Practically as soon as she’d crossed the threshold, Karen threw her arms around me and squeezed with all her

might.

“Thank goodness you’re back safe!” she cried. “I heard the adventurers you were tagging along with came across two murder grizzlies. Are you injured? Does it hurt anywhere? Are you all right?”

Ah, so that was what was going on. She must’ve overheard one of the Blue Flash crew talking about our encounter with the murder grizzlies. That explained why she’d sounded so flustered—she was worried about me. It’s true that going on the adventure had been all my idea, but the reason I’d even thought of it in the first place was because I’d needed to find a way to do what Karen had requested of me, so she probably felt like it was her fault that I’d gotten myself into such a dangerous situation. She really had a strong sense of responsibility.

“And it’s all because of my stupid request...” Karen berated herself. “I’m so, so sorry, Shiro! You...” she said hesitantly. “You’re not hurt anywhere, are you?”

She seemed on the verge of tears. In all our previous meetings, she’d always been so calm and collected, but right here and now, she was completely freaking out. I almost couldn’t believe this was the same person. I wanted to reassure her and tell her I was totally fine, but I was in a slight predicament: she was hugging me really, *really* hard and my face had been completely swallowed by her breasts, which meant whenever I tried to speak, only unintelligible babbling came out.



“Shiro? What’s wrong? You can’t speak? Oh no...” Karen gasped, a look of dread on her face. “Don’t tell me your throat got injured! Come with me! I’ll take you to the doctor right away!”

My throat’s just fine, but it won’t stay that way for long if you keep squeezing me so hard! It wasn’t looking good for me, and the fact I couldn’t breathe properly was starting to become a bit of an issue.

“Miss Karen, Mister Shiro can’t breathe,” Aina piped up. “Could you let go of him, please?”

“Huh?” the mayor said, looking down. “Oh, Aina. I didn’t see you there.”

She seemed to have been momentarily distracted by the little girl, and her hold on me loosened ever so slightly. This was my chance! I gripped Karen by the shoulders and pushed hard until I finally managed to free myself from the prison that was her ample bosom. I’d successfully cheated death. I immediately gulped down some revitalizing fresh air.

“Phew! I’m finally free!” I panted.

“Oh, Shiro! You can speak! I’m so glad!” she exclaimed, looking relieved.

“Please rest assured, my throat is perfectly fine. And I’m not hurt anywhere else either. The Blue Flash crew did a great job of protecting me.”

“But the leader of the—what was it they were called? The ‘Blue Flash,’ you said? Anyway, he told me you led the battle against the murder grizzlies.”

Sorry, what? Raiya, what the heck have you been telling Karen? Well, I *had* used the bear deterrent spray, but that was my total contribution to that particular fight. Did adventurers really consider that “battling”? Anyway, judging by Karen’s reaction, I was quite sure Raiya had greatly exaggerated the tale of our encounter with the beasts.

“I don’t think I did anything that could be classed as ‘battling,’ though,” I told her. “All I did was use an item that weakened the murder grizzlies. The Blue Flash crew did the rest.”

“Is that really all you did?” Karen said, a little skeptically.

“Yes. I stood far back from the enemies and only used my items from a

distance,” I confirmed. “It wasn’t like I actually fought them myself or anything.”

“Thank goodness,” she said, then promptly dropped to her knees on the floor. She must have been so overcome with relief, all of her strength suddenly deserted her. “I’ve been so worried about you. And then, when I was walking through town, I overheard a group of adventurers talking about how you’d battled *two* murder grizzlies all by yourself. I’ve heard they’re horrifically dangerous creatures that even seasoned adventurers had a hard time fighting—if they even battled them at all, because most of the time, they simply ended up fleeing at the sight of them. That’s why I thought you’d...”

Yup. As I thought, Raiya had embellished what had happened to us. Seems like I hadn’t been the only one who’d had the idea of jazzing up the story a little.

“I’m sorry for causing you so much distress,” I said gently.

“No, I should be the one apologizing. I jumped to conclusions and I shouldn’t have,” Karen said, still slumped on the floor. “Anyway, more importantly than that...” She extended her right hand. “I don’t think I can get up on my own. Could you please help me?”

I grabbed her hand and helped her to her feet. She still seemed a bit unsteady, though, so I let her lean on me for a little while.

“So how was the adventure, Shiro? Was it worthwhile?” a now-seated Karen asked me, suddenly changing the topic. It was almost as if she were trying to hide her embarrassment over needing to use me to prop herself up just a moment ago...

“It was really helpful, yes,” I replied. “I just need a little bit more time to stock up on a few things, and then I’m sure I’ll be able to dazzle the inspector from the royal capital guild with the products I have to offer.”

Karen flashed me a knowing smile, then inched toward me and brought her lips close to my ear. “‘A little bit more time to stock up on a few things,’ huh?” she whispered, then chuckled. “You don’t need to hide it from me. You have some kind of storage skill, don’t you? Or a storage item, maybe?”

She'd brought her face closer to mine because she probably didn't want Aina overhearing her, though I hadn't been expecting this question to come out of her mouth, and I froze for a few seconds.

"Wh-What are you talking about?" I stammered.

She let out another chuckle. "You're such a bad liar. I like that about you. Though I'm slightly worried it might get in the way of your job one day."

She was right about me having a way of storing things. So right, in fact, I didn't even know how to answer.

"Don't get me wrong," she continued. "I'm not planning on blackmailing you or anything. You see, while storage skills and items are quite rare, I actually know a few people who possess them. And the moment I laid eyes on you, I already had an inkling you might belong in that category. You have the same aura."

"The same aura?" I repeated hesitantly, somewhat confused about what this meant.

"Yes. Or at least, that's what my intuition told me. So..." she prompted. "Am I right?"

I raised my hands and conceded defeat. "Yep. You're spot on. I do indeed have a storage skill."

"I thought it must be something like that. This is a rather remote region, after all, and I couldn't get my head around how you were able to get your hands on so many matches day after day. But you don't actually need to, do you? Because you stocked up on them beforehand, didn't you?"

"Huh? 'Couldn't get your head around'? Wait, didn't you say your 'intuition' told you I had a storage skill when we first met?"

"I lied," she said with a smirk.

"What?!"

I had unconsciously raised my voice and Aina immediately turned to me with a worried look on her face. "Mister Shiro? Are you okay?"

"Yeah, sorry for startling you. I'm fine," I reassured her.

“Kay!” she said cheerily.

I turned back to Karen. “You lied to me,” I said accusingly—and a little sulkily—which earned me another chuckle.

“Consider it negotiation practice,” Karen said airily. “You’ll find it will come in handy in the future. There’s no need to get so angry.”

“I’m not *angry*, per se. But you’re right,” I conceded. “I do need to get better at negotiating.” After all, outfoxing one another was basically standard practice for merchants. Besides, grandma always used to tell me I was too quick to believe what people told me.

“Precisely,” Karen agreed. “The people you’ll be doing business with won’t always be honest with you. There will be occasions where you’ll need to do some negotiating. It won’t be easy, but you should try to keep that in mind.”

“I’ll do my best,” I grumbled, pretending I was still sulking, which made Karen laugh loudly.

“Anyway, let’s get back to the topic at hand,” she announced before clearing her throat, her expression now stern and serious. “Do you have any item in your possession currently that adventurers and the guild inspector would take a keen interest in?”

“Yes. I’m pretty confident in my products,” I stated.

She chuckled. “I can see that, yes. I’m relieved, though. I’m very thankful to God for blessing me by ensuring our paths crossed. And of course, I’m thankful to you too.”

“Aw, come on, you’re exaggerating!” I teased, and we smiled at each other.

“At any rate, what do you plan to sell? I’m not trying to be nosy or anything, but if it’s all right with you, could you please show me what you’ve brought?”

“Ooh, show me too! I wanna see!” Aina piped up, running up to us upon hearing Karen’s words.

“Sure, I don’t mind,” I said, opening my rucksack. “The items I plan to show to the inspector from the royal capital guild are...”—I paused slightly to build up the suspense—“...these!” I announced as I took the items the Blue Flash crew

had liked the most out of my bag.

I started lining them up on the counter, all the while explaining what each one was to Karen and Aina. “These are preserved foods. Simply add boiling water and you’ve got a nice warm meal you can enjoy wherever you are. And this is called a ‘survival blanket.’ It’s just like a regular blanket and it’ll help adventurers to stay warm on cold nights. And finally, this rolled-up, round thingy is called a collapsible water bottle. Here, hold it. It’s pretty light, right? Well, this little baby can actually store way more water than the water bags adventurers currently lug around.”

In truth, I’d actually brought all of these for my “trial adventure,” thinking they might be of some use to me on it. Aina simply stared at the items, her head tilted to one side with a puzzled look on her face, as she had no idea what any of these things could be used for. Karen, on the other hand, understood exactly how useful they would be.

“I never knew items like these existed...” she whispered, her eyes wide.



Karen told me that the inspector from the royal capital guild had apparently reached the next town over. Why only “apparently,” you may ask? Well, because Karen had received the information via carrier pigeon. It was a two-day carriage ride from the nearest town to Ninoritch, which meant—taking into account the pigeon’s own traveling time—the inspector could arrive the next day at the earliest, or in two days’ time at the latest, according to Karen.

“We had a lot of customers today too, Mister Shiro!” Aina chirped once we’d closed up for the day.

“Yeah. That’s good.”

I’d started selling more items on top of my regular matches. They were all pretty ordinary items, but ones that would make life a bit easier for the residents of this town, like toothpicks, dustcloths, brooms, dustpans, and a few other things. But despite how run-of-the-mill they were, the housewives here seemed to love them, and I’d barely had time to restock the shelves before they were empty again. It had, once again, been a really profitable day.

“Mister Shiro, do I put this here?” Aina asked as we stocked up the shelves with the items I intended to show the guild inspector.

“Yeah, that’s good,” I confirmed.

“Oh, and this one is all shiny and pretty, so I think we should put it *here*. What do you think?” the little girl asked.

“Oh, you’re right. If we place it there, the inspector will probably be more likely to pick it up. Yup, looks good to me. Put it there.”

“Okay!”

Opening my own shop had taught me two things: one, you couldn’t just place products at random on the shelves—you needed to arrange them in a way that made them look good; and two, I was absolutely terrible at it. But thankfully, God hadn’t abandoned me completely. Almost as if to make up for my lack of arranging skills, Aina was incredibly good at it. The shop always looked so much better when she was the one placing the products on the shelves. It was almost like magic.

“Hey, Aina, can you organize these as well?” I asked, taking some more items out of my inventory and handing them to the little girl.

“Sure!” she said cheerfully.

I’d ended up telling her about my Inventory skill as well, simply because I thought that, as she was helping me out in my shop, she really *should* know about it.

“I’m done, Mister Shiro!” Aina declared.

“Thank you, Aina. You did good.”

Just as we finished restocking the shelves, Raiya and Nesca walked into the shop. Ladies and gentlemen, behold, the happy couple.

“Hey, man. How ya doing?” Raiya greeted me.

“Hi, Raiya, Nesca,” I replied. “I’m doing all right, thanks.”

“Your shop seems to be doing great,” Nesca said, sounding as lethargic as always.

“It is, thankfully,” I confirmed.

When we stumbled upon the murder grizzlies, Raiya had confessed his feelings to Nesca in the heat of the moment. I wasn’t really sure what had happened after that, but it seemed like they were now an item. Congratulations. I’m green with envy. May you both get blown to bits.

“Oh, by the way,” Raiya began, “Emi told us some big shot from another Adventurers’ Guild is coming to town. Know anything about it?”

“Ah, so you’ve heard about that already?” I said. “Impressive.”

“Well, it’s a pretty big deal for us adventurers, y’know,” Raiya told me, before processing what I’d said. “Hey, wait a minute. You knew about it?”

“Yep. The mayor told me,” I said simply.

“The *mayor* told you?” he exclaimed. “Damn, being a hotshot merchant sure does get you places, doesn’t it?”

“Don’t call me that!” I protested. “But basically...” And I explained the situation, telling them that Karen had requested I show off a few items to the guild’s representative, which is why I already knew that the inspector was coming to town. “Anyway, I think that’s about the gist of it,” I concluded.

“Oh, I get it now,” Raiya said. “The mayor wants the inspector to see that there’s a bunch of adventurer-oriented items being sold in Ninoritch—and pretty amazing ones at that—which should make the guild want to open up a branch here. Is that right?”

“Bingo,” I confirmed. “I actually just finished stocking the shelves with the items I’m going to show off. Hopefully, the inspector will like them.”

“I see,” Raiya said, his gaze drifting over the items Aina and I had lined up on the shelves before giving me a firm nod. “All of these items look really useful to us adventurers. You get the Blue Flash seal of approval, man.”

“Thanks.”

“The mayor seems pretty set on having that guild open up a branch here, doesn’t she? Even going as far as asking you to do all that. Well, I can’t really blame her, though. The Silver Moon guild’s in a pretty bad state right now.

She's a pretty good mayor, to be honest."

"She is," Nesca agreed sleepily. "In most remote regions, people don't even bother with currency. They just exchange goods with each other. But Ninoritch has a proper economy. It's really impressive."

"Really?" I said. "I didn't know that."

"Yup. It's also pretty rare for such a remote town to have so many people in it," Raiya observed.

Ninoritch had a total population of five hundred, which I was now finding out was considered a lot for a little town in a remote region like this.

"I see. So there's a good chance that capital guild will want to open a branch here, then?" I asked.

"Who knows? But there are loads of monsters in the forest, as well as a bunch of mushrooms and herbs that can be used to make medicine. Frankly, I think having two or three guilds here wouldn't be such a bad thing. After all, it'd mean we could finally leave the Silver Moon guild," Raiya said and let out a roaring laugh.

"I'm sure Emille would be really sad if she heard you say that," I warned him.

"Well, I *am* an adventurer, after all. It's not that weird," he said.

Nesca nodded. "A lot of adventurers change guilds," she confirmed.

"Really? That must be tough for the guilds," I observed.

"You're way, way too nice, man," Raiya said. "Anyway, we can only hope it's a good one that's opening up here soon."

"Not all guilds are good, you see," Nesca explained. "I don't know which guild it is that's sending an inspector here, but I hope it's one of the decent ones."

"Wait, you mean some guilds aren't 'decent'?" I queried.

Raiya nodded, as if it went without saying. "Yep. There are a few notoriously bad ones, like the Devil's Trident and the Poisonous Dragon's Fang, but the worst one has to be..."

"The Maze Marauders," Nesca said, finishing his sentence. She hadn't even

looked across at Raiya, yet she knew immediately which guild he was about to say. That in itself showed just how bad its reputation was.

“The worst one, you say?” I asked.

“Yep,” Raiya said. “The Maze Marauders are the third biggest Adventurers’ Guild in the land, but by all accounts, they’re a pretty nasty bunch.”

“Now that I think about it, Karen did tell me the name of the guild that plans to open up a branch here,” I recalled. “Now, what was it again? Hmmm...” I stood with my arms crossed, trying to remember the discussion I’d had with Karen.

“Oh!” Aina piped up. “Miss Karen said they were called the ‘Maze Ma-raw-ders,’ I think!”

None of the grown-ups in the room said anything.

“Raiya...” I said after a little while.

“What is it?” he replied.

“Does Karen know about the Maze Marauders’ reputation?”

“Probably not,” he admitted. “Only adventurers really care about that sort of stuff. And sure, she might be the mayor, but in a region as remote as this one...”

“I see,” I said.

That did make sense. After all, there wasn’t any social media in this world—or for that matter, any phones. There must have been a whole host of things that were common knowledge in certain areas but completely unknown in the rest of the world. So the inspector who was about to show up in Ninoritch was the representative for the worst Adventurers’ Guild in the land.

Hang in there, Karen. I’ll try to help you out as much as possible.

Chapter Twelve: Negotiations with the Evil Guild

“This inspector person is taking a long time to get here, Mister Shiro.”

“You said it...” I agreed. I’d been told the inspector would arrive today at the latest, but...

“What if they got lost?” Aina suggested innocently.

“I dunno...” I said skeptically. “I think it’s pretty much a straight road from the nearest town,” I said. “Maybe they’re just taking their time.”

“Well, hopefully, they won’t be too long,” the little girl said.

“Yeah, hopefully.”

There was no sign the inspector would be turning up any time soon. I could only think of two reasons for the guild’s representative to be so late: either the carriage had been slowed down by an accident, or the person in question just wasn’t the punctual type. Based on what Raiya and Nesca had told me, the guild this person represented had a terrible reputation, so my second theory was a pretty plausible one.

The sun had already started setting, and I watched it slowly descend behind a mountain. I felt really bad for Karen, who had been dutifully waiting at the town gates since the day before in order to extend a proper welcome to the guild’s representative.

“Ah, the town bell is ringing,” I said, and Aina tilted her head to one side to try to hear it.

Ding dong, ding dong. The sound was coming from the center of town, where a bell rang several times a day to let the inhabitants know what time it was. At this time of the day, it was ringing to indicate that evening had come and everyone should start making their way home.

“Well, looks like they’re not coming today either,” I concluded. “You can head off now, Aina. Thank you for your work today. You did good.”

“Good work today, Mister Shiro!” she said, beaming at me.

“Hurry up and head home before it gets dark, okay?” I told her.

“Okay! Are you going home too?”

“Hm, I might stick around for a little bit longer. Who knows, maybe the inspector will show up at the last minute.”

“I’ll stay here with you, then!” the little girl said excitedly.

“Not happening. Your mom will worry about you if you’re not home at the usual time, won’t she?” I admonished her.

She nodded. “Okay...” she pouted. “Fine.”

I’d never really asked Aina about her mother, but it seemed the little girl loved her very much. I assumed the reason she was even working at all despite being only eight was probably to help her mother out.

“See you tomorrow, Mister Shiro,” she said, looking reluctant to go, though she did eventually leave the shop.

I went outside with her to send her off properly.

“Bye-bye, Mister Shiro!” she called back to me, constantly turning around and waving at me as she walked off home. I didn’t want to lose this little battle of wills with her, so I stayed outside the store until I couldn’t see her anymore, then headed back inside.

I waited another hour, but the inspector still didn’t show. The sun had set by this point, and as there were no street lights, it was pitch-black outside. There were no taverns in this part of town either, which meant the streets were completely silent. Surely the guild’s representative wouldn’t turn up this late, right?

Just as I was getting up out of my chair to go over and lock the door, a short woman entered through it.

“Hello?” she said as she walked in. Judging by her outfit, she must have been an adventurer, but she wasn’t someone I’d seen around here before.

“Is this ‘Shiro’s Shop’?” she asked.

Hm. Now that I came to think about it, I'd never actually given my shop a name.

"It is," I confirmed.

She looked relieved. "Oh, thank goodness you're still open."

"You're an adventurer, right?" I guessed. "Are you looking for anything in particular?"

More than half of my customers were adventurers, so I'd gotten pretty good at dealing with their needs. In fact, after my little trial adventure, I'd even started chit-chatting and making little jokes with the adventurers who came into my store.

"Oh, not exactly," the woman said. "A friend of mine told me you sell a lot of adventurer-oriented items, so I wanted to see what you stocked in this store for myself."

"I see."

"I apologize for coming so late," she said earnestly. "If it's not too much of a bother, might I take a look at what items you sell?"

"Of course, go ahead," I told her. "Don't mind me. Take your time to look at everything we have on offer here. Oh, and if you have any questions, I'll be happy to help."

"Thank you. I will take you up on that kind offer," she said, and proceeded to wander around the shop.

Aina had handwritten some brief explanatory notes for everything on display and placed them beside the corresponding items on the shelves. All of the items were uncomplicated enough that a short verbal explanation of their function would be enough for anyone to be able to then use them, but customers loved how thoughtful these little notes were.

"Are these the renowned 'matches' everyone has been talking about?" the woman queried.

"They are, indeed. Did you perhaps want to try them out?" I asked.

"Yes, please."

Ah, my best-selling product: the matches. Apparently, it had become nearly impossible to find anyone who hadn't bought some, either in Ninoritch or the next town over.

"You just have to do this, and then..." I explained, demonstrating how to strike a match. "There you go. Fire."

"I've heard so much about these little things, but even after seeing one create fire with my own eyes, I'm still having a hard time believing they're real..." the woman said, her voice full of wonder. "Might I give it a try?"

"Of course. Here you go," I said, handing her the matches.

She struck the match against the side of the box, and it caught light instantly.

"What an impressive item," she said, sounding extremely impressed. She then turned her attention to the other items on the shelf. "And what is this silver-colored item?" she asked.

"Oh, this thing?" I said, pointing at it before heading over to the counter where I kept one of the item in question for demonstration purposes. "It's called a 'survival blanket.' It protects you from the cold and it's easy to pack. Here, let me unfold it and show you," I said, and proceeded to do just that.

A survival blanket was a thin blanket made out of aluminum foil that kept a person warm by reducing heat loss. The way it worked was, when wrapped around someone, it trapped in their body heat so it couldn't escape, which had the effect of warming the person up. It was an incredibly practical item that a lot of hikers kept on them in case of emergency. It was about 210 cm wide and 130 cm long, but when completely folded, it was almost small enough to fit in your pocket. The Blue Flash adventuring party had praised this particular item to no end, claiming it would allow them to free up lots of space in their backpacks, because they wouldn't have to take so many thick blankets with them when going on adventures in the future. It was also one of the items that had knocked Karen's socks off the other day.

"So you're saying *this thing* can protect a person from the cold?" the woman asked, visibly confused.

"It looks a bit gaudy, it's true, but it works. Instead of me boring you with a

long-winded explanation, how about you try it out for yourself? Wrap it around you.”

“All right,” she agreed reluctantly, but as soon as the survival blanket was around her shoulders, her expression changed to one of surprise. “Impressive! It’s so thin, and yet so warm,” she said, marveling at it.

“Isn’t it? And if you take one of these along on your adventure, you have no need to pack a thicker blanket, which leaves you with more space for food and water.”

“Exactly, my good sir! This truly is revolutionary for adventurers,” she said with a nod, still looking deeply impressed. “And what about this item here?” she asked, pointing to something else.

“Oh, that’s...”

The woman had entered the store just as I was about to close up for the night, and an hour after Aina had left. I then spent two hours showing and demonstrating every item in the store to her.

“Thank you kindly for explaining everything to me. I happen to be in a hurry, so I will have to excuse myself now.”

I’d spent all that time going through what each and every single item did, while she stood there slack-jawed, and in the end, she’d left without even buying anything.

I walked her to the door, and after she’d gone, I quietly muttered to myself, “Why was she in such a hurry all of a sudden?”



The day had finally arrived. According to Aina, the inspector had rolled into town earlier that day and was being attended to by Karen down at the town hall. When Aina had finished telling me all that, she’d said she was off to do some “scow-ting” (she’d probably picked up the word from Kilpha, who’d been talking about a “scouting mission” she’d gone on last time she was in our store) near the town hall, and departed practically as soon as she’d walked in.

“Karen must be hard at work trying to convince that guild representative to

open up a branch here, huh?" I mused.

She'd told me her plan for the day in one of our previous conversations. She was going to start by inviting the inspector to the town hall and giving a rundown of the kinds of monsters, animals, herbs, and minerals one could find in the forest just outside of town. Then, she'd take the guild representative on a tour of the town—making sure to swing by the marketplace, of course—before bringing him or her to my store, where I'd show off a few of the items I had for sale, including the matches. After that, she'd take the inspector back to the town hall and finally ask whether or not a branch of the capital guild they represented would be opened in Ninoritch.

"I'm finally going to meet this inspector," I said to myself. "I wonder what kind of person they are."

I was so stressed, my stomach was in knots, reminding me of back when I was a corporate drone, because I'd always gotten like this before an important business meeting. Though at my last company, regardless of how well those kinds of meetings went, it was never reflected in my salary. That didn't mean I could just wing them, however, because if the meetings went badly, my already practically nonexistent bonus for that month would be even more minuscule. That had been the company's brutal strategy to destroy the hopes and dreams of all of us poor corporate slaves.

This time, though, I shouldn't really have been under that much pressure. After all, Karen was the one doing all the negotiating, not me. I was just supposed to help her out a bit. But she *had* asked for my help, and if I didn't do my part properly, could I really call myself a man? I'm sure grandma would have said something along those lines too. She always used to tell me to do whatever I could to help people.

"I can do it, grandma," I said resolutely to the air around me.

If the inspector liked my items, there'd be a greater possibility of this capital guild opening up a branch here. Even though Karen hadn't said it out loud, I was pretty sure I'd be playing quite a big role in these negotiations. On top of that, I was naturally worried after hearing about the guild's less-than-savory reputation, plus I felt guilty for Emille, who was doing her best to sort out the

Silver Moon guild's problems.

On the other hand, think of Adventurers' Guilds like multiservice businesses. Now, we can all agree that if there were several guilds in town, instead of people having to rely on one single guild, they'd all be competing with each other, which would result in better service, right? Ever since I'd started looking at it that way, I'd stopped umming and ahing about the situation.

"I'll just give it my best shot," I resolved.

And most importantly of all, this would allow me to repay Karen for all her help.

"All right, let's do this!" I said, in an attempt to pump myself up.

But just at that moment, Aina came running back into the shop. "Mister Shiro!" she called out to me with a serious look on her face as she tried to catch her breath.

"What's wrong, Aina?" I asked, before thinking of what it might be. "Oh! Is the inspector on their way?"

If that were true, it was much earlier than I'd been anticipating, and it would mean needing to quickly fix my hair and start brewing some tea.

But Aina just shook her head. "Miss Karen told me I needed to bring you to the Silver Moon Ad-vent-you-rers' Guild right away."

"The Silver Moon guild? But why?" I asked, puzzled by this.

"I dunno, but she said she was going there with the inspector person! And she said she wanted you to come too."

"I don't really get what's going on..." I said. "But all right. Lead on, Aina!"

"Right!"

And so, Aina and I headed off to the Silver Moon guild.



I knocked at the main door of the Silver Moon's guildhall.

"It's Shiro. I'm coming in," I called out, before opening the door and going inside.

“I-I’m coming in too...” Aina echoed, clinging to the back of my shirt as she followed me into the guildhall.

“Oh, Shiro! You’re here!” Karen said by way of greeting. She was already inside, waiting for me. The outfit she was wearing was more revealing in the chest area than usual, and I wondered if it was a cultural thing to greet important guests in a garment like that, or if it was just because she thought it might make the inspector more amenable.

The Blue Flash crew were also there, as was Emille, whose stance looked quite menacing. The final person in the room was a middle-aged man with a bit of a beer belly, who I could only assume was the aforementioned inspector from the capital guild. He was busy looking around the guildhall and didn’t seem to have noticed me come in.

“Shiro, I know you’ve only just arrived, but can I introduce you to the inspector?” Karen asked me quietly.

“Of course. I brought the items with me too. Including the matches,” I replied, patting my rucksack.

She nodded and brought her face closer to my ear. “Thank you for that. The inspector is being rather...”—she searched for the right word—“...*difficult*. I apologize in advance, but if he’s a little rude to you, can you please just bear with it?” she whispered to me.

We hadn’t even been introduced yet, but I already knew this man was going to be a real pain to deal with. “Don’t worry, I’m used to people like him. I’ll be fine,” I whispered back.

Verbal abuse getting hurled all over the place had been a daily staple at my last company, after all. It had been so rampant there, I was totally used to that kind of behavior by this point. I’d even found myself on the end of it at times.

“I do have a question, though...” I said. “Why are we *here*, of all places? Didn’t you say you were bringing him to my shop?”

“He’s the one who requested to come here. I just went along with it,” Karen said, glancing over at the middle-aged man.

“I see.”

“After all, Emille hates me, so it’s not like I really *wanted* to come here,” she continued. “And I’m *definitely* sure she didn’t want to see me.”

Judging by the menacing stance that had been taken up by the Silver Moon’s acting guildmaster, that seemed a pretty safe bet. She would occasionally hiss at the middle-aged man—her potential business rival—and growl at Karen, but both of them were ignoring her, so it was a rather pitiful display.

“Well, negotiations never go exactly to plan,” I said philosophically.

“You’re right about that,” Karen agreed. “Well then. Are you ready?”

I nodded and she loudly cleared her throat.

“Mr. Gabbs,” she called out to the slightly overweight man. “Allow me to introduce you to our town’s top merchant, Shiro.”

The middle-aged man—who appeared to go by the name “Mr. Gabbs”—fixed his gaze on me.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Gabbs. My name is Shiro. I run a store in this town,” I called over to him, introducing myself with a slight bow.

“I’m his employee. My name is Aina,” the little girl by my side said, imitating me. She had become the perfect little store clerk.

The middle-aged man didn’t respond. Wait a second... He was ignoring us, wasn’t he? He was totally ignoring us!

“The mayor told me there was an extremely adept merchant selling rare items in this town, and I was looking forward to meeting them...” Mr. Gabbs said eventually. “But you’re still wet behind the ears. Are you sure you’re even a merchant, brat?”

Brat? That was a far cry from just being “difficult.” This man was a serious pain in the neck! Not the same type of pain in the neck Emille was, though.

“You’re right. I am still rather inexperienced,” I admitted calmly. “But I am a proper merchant, I assure you.”

He scoffed. “You dare to call yourself that when you’ve got a little kid for an employee? You country bumpkins throw the word ‘merchant’ about far too lightly.”

Aina was still at my side, and I knew those words would've stung her. I glanced down at her and noticed her eyes starting to fill with tears. *Ugh. Stay calm, Shiro, stay calm*, I told myself. *Patience is the name of the game. Patience with a capital P.*

"And what's up with this guildhall anyway?" he continued. "The receptionist is a filthy demi-human, and the place is full of dust! Do you guys even clean in here? Not properly, if you do."

Oh boy. I knew Emille was going to be pissed at that. From her spot behind the counter, she fixed the middle-aged man with a glare and...

"*I do the cleaning here*," she said in a bratty voice. "And I do it every day! I have so much free time on my hands, it's the *only* thing I do all day!"

She rounded off her tirade by blowing a raspberry at the man, which was rather unladylike. Emille had just spilled the beans about the Silver Moon's lack of business to someone from a rival guild. It sounded like she'd already accepted defeat.

The man scoffed again. "You do all that cleaning and the place still looks like *this*? That's surprising. So out here in the country, demi-humans can't even clean properly, huh? The ones in the capital can at least get that right. Who would've thought even such a simple thing would be so different here? Good grief. I really don't get the mindset of people who live out in the sticks," he said, shrugging as if to highlight his exasperation.

Well, I really don't get why you'd go verbally abusing someone you've only just met, I retorted in my head.

He didn't stop there, though. "Demi-humans who can't even clean properly should be put down."

Emille's expression instantly darkened, and Kilpha—who was standing over by the wall—flicked out her claws.

"I-I apologize, Mr. Gabbs," Karen said hurriedly, trying to smooth things over. "There's a forest and quite a lot of fields around Ninoritch, so no matter what we do, dust always ends up getting inside. More importantly, Mr. Gabbs, might I ask you to take a look at the items Shiro sells?"

Her eyes darted in my direction. I immediately took a box of matches out of my rucksack and gave it to her. She then handed it to Mr. Gabbs.

“These are the ‘matches’ I was talking to you about earlier,” she explained. “This item is incredibly efficient at starting fires and Shiro is the only person who sells them.”

“Oh?” he said, finally looking interested. “So *these* are the matches everyone’s been talking about. Hm, let me try them out.”

He took out a match and struck it against the side of the box like he’d done it before, and it immediately caught light.

“Interesting,” he said, gazing at the small flame. “Well, at least your items are good. I can see why the mayor recommended you, brat.”

“I’m glad you do, Mr. Gabbs,” Karen said. “I’m sure his shop would be of great use to the adventurers registered with your guild. As the mayor of Ninoritch, I guarantee it would.”

Mr. Gabbs snorted derisively. “A guarantee from the mayor of a tiny, out-of-the-way town? What use is that to me?”

Karen looked like she wanted to say something, but she didn’t.

“But these ‘matches’ would certainly be useful to our adventurers...” He let out a pensive “Hmmm” before continuing. “Well, why the hell not? The guildmaster has given me full authority on this matter. I accept your request to set up a branch of the Maze Marauders in this town.”

Thanks to my matches, it seemed the negotiations had been a success.

On hearing Mr. Gabbs’s words, Karen’s expression turned to one of surprise, then almost instantly transformed into one of joy. “R-Really, Mr. Gabbs? You’ll really set up a branch of your guild in Ninoritch?”

“Yes, really,” he said.

“That’s marvelous!” she exclaimed happily. “Then I shall—”

“However!” he interrupted her. “I have several conditions.”

“Conditions? What kind of conditions?” Karen asked.

Mr. Gabbs had a nasty, self-satisfied smile on his face, as if he'd been looking forward to this very moment. "Oh, only a few trivial things, Miss Mayor. First of all..."

Still sporting his smug grin, Mr. Gabbs chose this moment to glance across at Emille, who was in the room as the Silver Moon's representative.

"Our guild, the Maze Marauders, will henceforth be the only guild in town." He paused for a few seconds. "Hm, I can't seem to recall its name. What did you say this little guild of yours was called?"

"The Silver Moon," I said, and he let out a derisive snort in response. Behind him, her teeth clenched, Emille looked like she was about to burst into a fit of rage.

"Oh, right. That's what it's called. Well, shut down this puny little guild right away. If we're going to be opening up a branch here, you don't need another guild in the town." He paused briefly before continuing. "Next, we'll be exempt from taxes, naturally. After all, there aren't many benefits for us, having one of our branches in a town as remote as this one, so we're doing you a favor. Oh, and you'll be covering the construction costs of our new guildhall. And last but not least..."

Mr. Gabbs squinted at me.

"I want the selling rights to those 'matches' of yours."

"Huh?" I said.

I want the selling rights to those "matches" of yours. I hadn't been expecting that. I was at a complete loss for words.

"You're quite slow on the uptake, aren't you?" Mr. Gabbs sighed, shaking his head. "Are you *sure* you're a merchant? Let me repeat it one more time for you. We, the Maze Marauders, will buy up your entire stock of matches," he enunciated slowly.

"Wait, but wouldn't that mean I wouldn't be able to sell matches at my shop anymore?" I asked.

"Doesn't that go without saying?" he scoffed. "You won't have any left to sell

anyway.”

“But what about my customers? It’s not just adventurers who buy the matches; the townsfolk buy them too. If they can’t buy matches—”

“Are you stupid or something?” Mr. Gabbs spat. “Even if *you* don’t have any to sell, the townsfolk can just buy them at the branch of the Maze Marauders guild we’ll be setting up here. Such a simple solution, and yet it didn’t even cross your mind. This is precisely why you’d never survive as a merchant in a *real* city.”

“No, it *did* cross my mind. That’s why I’m so concerned,” I retorted. “If you buy up all my match stock, you’ll sell them on at a higher price, won’t you?”

“Well, we’ll probably have to up the price a *little*, yes,” he said, sounding completely unapologetic about it.

Judging by his expression, there was no way he was only going to up the price “a little.” Now, don’t get me wrong, I myself have been selling the matches for more than what they go for in Japan. But the look on his face scared me. I just had this feeling that, given the chance, he’d sell the matches for an exorbitant amount.

“Please wait a moment, Mr. Gabbs,” Karen interjected. She probably felt she couldn’t just stand by and watch any longer.

Mr. Gabbs knitted his brow, not even attempting to hide his displeasure at being interrupted. “What is it, Miss Mayor? I was in the middle of a conversation with this blockhead—sorry, I meant to say this *youngster* over here.”

“Shiro opened his store in Ninoritch out of simple goodwill,” Karen continued. “Even if it *is* to help the town develop, buying up all of his matches seems a little...”

“You clearly aren’t getting it either, Miss Mayor,” Mr. Gabbs scoffed. “We, the Maze Marauders, have branches nationwide, which means we can sell these matches in all corners of the kingdom. What’s the point of selling them exclusively in this desolate little town, way out in the sticks? But you see, if *we* were to sell the matches, practically everyone in the country would be able to

purchase them. Imagine the profits you'd make!" He ended his pitch with a smile in my direction, hoping the lure of riches would convince me to accept his offer.

"I see. So in short, there'd be more people to sell the matches to," I commented.

"Exactly," he confirmed.

"It's certainly an appealing offer," I remarked. "But I'm going to have to decline."

"Why?" Mr. Gabbs asked.

"Well, it's quite simple, actually. There's no way I can stock up on enough matches to cater to that many people," I said apologetically.

"Oh? 'Stock up,' you say?" Mr. Gabbs repeated, taking a few steps toward me until his portly belly was prodding into my own, much flatter stomach. "As I was saying just now, we have branches in every corner of the kingdom," he continued, his eyes firmly fixed on me. "Naturally, thanks to our many adventurers, we get a lot of intel about region-specific items and products." He paused briefly as he waited to see my reaction to this.

"I-I see," I said noncommittally.

"But strangely, we'd never heard of these 'matches' before," he continued after hearing what I had to say to this. "Not only have our adventurers never mentioned an item like it before, we also haven't heard anything about it from the Adventurers' Guilds in other nations that we often do business with. Don't you find that strange? That an item that doesn't seem to exist anywhere else on the continent has suddenly appeared in this remote little town?"

"Well, it's just that the artisan who makes the matches is a little eccentric and only wants to sell them to me—" I started, trying to fabricate some excuse that would adequately explain why I was the only one who had access to the matches, but he cut me off and called me out before I could get very far.

"All lies. You see, I got one of the adventurers from our guild to look into your operation and keep tabs on you for a few days. In that time, you managed to sell through your entire stock of matches a few times, yet you were somehow

able to restock without ever leaving the immediate vicinity of this town, not even once.”

I groaned as the visage of the woman who’d visited my store the other day immediately floated up in my mind’s eye. I thought it was strange for an adventurer I’d never seen before to just wander into my shop like that, but now it all made sense. She’d been investigating me.

“Have you ever considered the possibility that I might have a storage item?” I asked.

“What a preposterous notion,” Mr. Gabbs retorted, immediately waving away the idea. “If you had the ability to carry around a large number of matches, why would you be selling them in such a remote region?”

“Maybe I just like it here,” I said earnestly.

He snickered. “That’s a good one. Just tell me you set up shop here because you think the mayor is hot. At least I’d believe that.”

“I actually come from another world!” No, there was no way I could tell him that. I was at a loss on what to say.

“There’s only one possible explanation I can come up with,” he said, inching even closer to me until our noses were nearly touching. In my whole life, I never once imagined I’d be standing so close to a fat, middle-aged man while staring him in the eye. “You’re the one making the matches,” he declared confidently.

He had a triumphant look on his face, like the housekeeper in that TV suspense drama that used to be popular in Japan. Everyone else in the room seemed surprised by this assertion, and I could see them all wondering if Mr. Gabbs’s conclusion was right.

“I can only assume you’re an alchemist who got himself kicked out of one of the bigger guilds,” he continued. “And you either came all the way out here because you can only get the materials you require to make the matches in the nearby forest, or because you can’t—for one reason or another—show your face in the capital. Or maybe both of those things are true.”

He was totally barking up the wrong tree, and the more he expanded on his theories, the further he got from the truth. Me, an alchemist? Seriously? Hm,

what to do, what to do? How should I handle this situation?

While I was standing there, deep in thought, Karen suddenly stepped between me and Mr. Gabbs, and stood in front of me as if to protect me. She fixed her gaze on the middle-aged man.

“I apologize for this, Mr. Gabbs, but I have no intention of involving Shiro in our transaction. If you continue to insist on acquiring the selling rights to his matches, then please assume that I am no longer interested in you setting up a branch of your guild here,” she resolutely declared.

“I’m sorry? I think I must have misheard you,” Mr. Gabbs said after a pause. “Miss Mayor, could you please repeat that?”

“Of course. I’ll say it as many times as you like,” Karen said coolly. “Please assume that I am no longer interested in you setting up a branch of your guild here.”

She didn’t hesitate or backtrack, just repeated what she’d said in a clear voice while glaring at Mr. Gabbs the whole time. Granted, I hadn’t known her all that long, but the expression on her face in that moment was a new one on me.

“We, the Maze Marauders, came all the way out here to the middle of nowhere in order to offer you our help,” Mr. Gabbs said, returning her glare. “You get that, right?”

He flung his arms wide and raised his voice so everyone in the room could hear him.

“There are so many big guilds out there, and yet not a single one of them wants to open up a branch here. And do you know why that is? It’s actually pretty simple. There’s no benefit in setting up a branch here. It’s nowhere near any of the major cities, and transportation costs for staff members and materials alone would be through the roof. They’d also have to find reliable ways of communicating with the capital, which isn’t an easy task. In short, it wouldn’t be *profitable* to set up a guild in an area as remote as this. That’s why...” —he paused momentarily and jerked a thumb in the direction of Emille, who was standing behind him—“...you guys only have this puny little guild here,” he scoffed.

Emille scrunched up her face in frustration, but even she knew he was right in his evaluation.

“*And it’s on the verge of bankruptcy,*” Mr. Gabbs added, dealing the final blow.

Judging by the look on his face, it was obvious he was making fun of not just Emille, but the entire town. I’d reached my breaking point.

“Now hang on just a minute, Mr. Gabbs,” I said, trying to keep my cool. “I’ve heard there are rare monsters, herbs, and minerals in the forest just outside town. Wouldn’t that be enough of a reason for a guild to set up a branch here?”

I was repeating what Raiya and Nesca had told me the other day. They’d even told me having several Adventurers’ Guilds in town wouldn’t be an issue, due to how plentiful the resources were in this area.

“As a matter of fact, a few days ago, a loot merchant came to town and seemed very pleased with the murder grizzly fur he bought from this guild,” I added.

Mr. Gabbs humphed. “I have indeed heard about the rare monsters and materials that can be found in that large forest on the eastern edge of the town.”

“Yup. In the forest on the eastern edge of the town,” I confirmed. “Besides, there are plenty of adventurers who use Ninoritch as their base. Both of these things prove there’s enough merit to setting up a guild here. In fact, don’t you think it’d be weird *not* to do so if the opportunity arose?”

“Adventurers who use Ninoritch as their base, you say?” Mr. Gabbs scoffed, before bursting out into full-on laughter. “What a naive brat you are!” He had to pause for a good few seconds while he tried to catch his breath. “Stop making me laugh so much. Good grief, boy. You really are the very definition of foolish, aren’t you? Listen closely, you brain-dead brat. There are around twenty, maybe thirty adventurers in this town, and all of them are small fry who couldn’t cut it elsewhere. You know what adventurers who can’t make money in the capital or any of the other big cities do? They toddle off into the countryside, where there’s a lot less competition. And even then, they only ever manage to make enough to scrape by.”

As those words left his mouth, he turned to the Blue Flash crew and treated them to a condescending look of pity. Raiya clenched his fists in response, and I could only imagine the reason he didn't straight-up punch Mr. Gabbs square in the jaw was out of consideration for Karen. Or maybe he was just waiting for the perfect moment to fell him with a single punch.

"And yet Miss Mayor right here seems to be under the impression that this little town would be of some interest to adventurers!" Mr Gabbs said, almost hooting with laughter. "This little town out in the middle of nowhere! Can you believe it? Isn't that hilarious? Don't you pity her? Doesn't it just make you want to laugh? Hey, brat! You can laugh too, y'know."

Karen couldn't stop herself from lowering her head in shame at Mr. Gabbs's scornful remarks.

"You get it now, brat? There's no point or merit in us setting up a branch here. However..." He paused, and once again, he inched toward me until he was standing way too close to me. "If you give me the selling rights to those matches you sell..." He stopped and corrected himself. "Well, now that the cat is out of the bag, I suppose I should say 'the matches you make,' shouldn't I? If you give me the selling rights to them, I can do you all a favor and set up a branch in this town."

"I've already told you I'm refusing your offer, Mr. Gabbs—" Karen started, but the man cut her off immediately.

"Shut up, Miss Mayor. I'm talking to the brat here. Or should I say, the *alchemist*."

Even though she was obviously frustrated with the situation, Karen lapsed into silence, before turning her head in my direction, her eyes meeting mine. It seemed like she was trying to tell me something with her eyes.

"So what will you do, alchemist?" Mr. Gabbs asked me.

It appeared I'd leveled up from "brat" to "alchemist."

"If we, the Maze Marauders, set up a branch here," he continued, "this desolate little town will most likely get much richer and a lot more prosperous. The future of this town is in your hands."

“I suppose you won’t give me time to think it over, will you?”

“You’re right, I won’t,” Mr. Gabbs said. “After all, I’m a busy man. I want you to give me your answer right here and now.”

All right, time to assess the situation. If we wanted to get technical about it, Karen had gotten the offer from the guild to set up a branch in Ninoritch before I’d even opened my shop here. Plus, the fact Mr. Gabbs didn’t want any other guild in town most likely suggested that he wanted his guild to be the only one that could profit from the forest’s resources. In short, even if they didn’t acquire the selling rights to the matches, the Maze Marauders would still benefit from setting up a branch here.

I let out a long “hmmm” as I mulled it over. I’d only met Mr. Gabbs earlier that day, but I needed to take his temperament into account and try to think one step ahead. He struck me as the kind of person who would take advantage of other people’s weaknesses and almost threaten them into accepting his unreasonable requests.

But wait a minute! My boss at my last company was exactly the same: greedy and bitter. And if they were indeed two peas in a pod, that meant I could easily predict Mr. Gabbs’s way of thinking.

At first, he’d planned on coming to the little town of Ninoritch to coerce the authorities here into accepting his unreasonable demands. Then, once he’d set up a branch of his guild here and with no other guilds left in town, the Maze Marauders would have a monopoly on Ninoritch’s resources and materials. But then he’d heard about the matches I was selling, and while I don’t mean to brag, my matches were considered a very valuable item in this world. *Extremely* valuable, judging by how fast they sold out every single time. And so, the greedy Mr. Gabbs had come up with the idea of setting up a branch of the Maze Marauders here only on the condition that he’d get a monopoly on these matches as well. I now knew he’d gotten some of his adventurer lackeys to investigate me, so it was safe to assume that he was aware Karen and I were on friendly terms, which would explain why he’d just said to me that the town’s “future” lay in my hands. He obviously thought saying that would convince me to willingly hand over my monopoly on matches to him.

What a greedy man. With people like him, if you agree to even the slightest concession, they get all cocky and put forward yet more unreasonable demands. There was only one suitable response in a situation like this. *All right*, I thought. *Karen's already refused his request, so all I have to do is give him a big, fat "no" as we—*

"Also, if you agree to do business with the Maze Marauders, we'll make sure you can hire some skilled employees to replace that little kid," Mr. Gabbs said unexpectedly. He was grinning from ear to ear, convinced this was some incredible offer I'd jump at.

"Sorry? What did you just say?" I asked him. I was so angry, I was starting to see red.

"Like I said, I can find you a replacement for that useless kid. After all, I'm sure you didn't really want to hire the little brat in the first place, did you? I can hire some new employees for you, if that's what you want. And I mean *competent* ones. Not like the kid or the filthy demi-humans over there."

I knew those words would've stung Aina. A countdown had started in my head. This situation reminded me of the moment I'd decided to quit my former job. On that fateful day, I'd lost it with my nasty ex-boss, who was forever bullying the junior member of staff who used to follow me around everywhere.

"So what do you say, brat?" Mr. Gabbs asked me. "Do you want to keep on selling your little matches in this town with no future, or will you hand over the selling rights to the matches to the Maze Marauders and make yourself enough money to last a lifetime, all while helping this town to grow? Time for you to give your answer. If you're not a total idiot, I'm sure you won't even hesitate."

I could see that he was waiting impatiently for my answer. I smiled at him, and he grinned back at me. And that's when I lost it.

"Go to hell, you louse!" I yelled, and with all my strength, I threw a straight right that connected with his face.



He let out a shriek as he doubled over backward from the impact. I wasn't done yet, though. In fact, I was just getting started. He was about to get hit with my Soul Strike—the special technique I'd used against my former boss!

I wrapped my arms around his portly frame and squeezed tightly as I lifted him off the ground and spun him a hundred and eighty degrees so that he was upside down. Then I jumped up with his head sandwiched between my knees and performed a seat drop, violently slamming his head into the floorboards.

A perfect pile driver. It was the forbidden special technique I'd used against my former boss when I'd decided to quit my job a couple of months ago. The battle in my former workplace had then evolved into a battle in court, and I'd managed to get a nice amount of compensation for all the recorded instances of power harassment against me by my boss, as well as for the unpaid overtime hours I'd done, which were all noted on the time sheet.

Mr. Gabbs was rolling around on the floor, clutching his head.

"I hate violence!" I yelled at him at the top of my lungs. "I really, *really* hate violence! But I'm not going to stand by and do nothing while you're making fun of my employee—while you're making fun of Aina!"

My heart had obviously taken control of my mouth. Everyone in the room was utterly flabbergasted at what they'd just witnessed. Everyone except for Aina, that is.

"Mister Shiro..." she said, her voice trembling, then she threw herself into my arms.

"Y-You swine!" Mr. Gabbs roared as he got back to his feet, having recovered from my attack. "How dare you..." he spluttered with spittle-flecked rage. "How dare you!"

His eyes were bloodshot and he was pointing an accusing finger at me. "I hope you realize there will be consequences for what you just did!"

"Oh? And could you enlighten me on what exactly these 'consequences' might be?" I said, taking a step toward him.

Mr. Gabbs flinched and took two steps back. "I'm an executive at the Maze

Marauders! A-After what you just did to me, you'll—no, it won't just be you. *Everyone* in this town will be punished!"

"Did you just declare war on my town, Mr. Gabbs?" Karen asked, her eyes, cold as steel, firmly fixed on the man.

"Th-That's..." he sputtered, but Karen continued with a stern look on her face.

"If that was indeed your intention, as mayor of this town, I will need to inform the governor of the region of this development. What do you say, Mr. Gabbs? Should I report this to Margrave Bashure?"

All the color in Mr. Gabbs's face instantly drained away at the mention of the margrave's name. "N-Now hold on a minute! That's not what I meant! I just meant..." he protested, clearly flustered, then paused as he searched for what to say next. "I-If you agree to hand over the selling rights to the matches to me, I'll pretend this little incident never happened! Forgive and forget, as they say. How's that sound?"

How could this guy be so obstinate? Though he was way more suited to being a merchant than I was, I'll give him that.

"What do you mean, 'How's that sound?'?" I snorted. "No way. Not happening. Yes, I'm a merchant, that much is true. A filthy, greedy merchant. But I'm not rotten enough to do business with someone who makes Aina cry. I'll only say this once, so open your ears and listen closely."

I grabbed him by the lapels and brought his face close to mine. For the third time that day, I was standing way, way too close to this man.

"I will never do business with you," I enunciated calmly. "And not just with you—I won't have any dealings with your adventurers either. If *any* member of the Maze Marauders comes into my shop, I'll kick them straight out again without so much as a word. You got that?!" I raised my voice toward the end, which made the man flinch and let out a frightened little squeal. Hey, even someone like me could make convincing threats when I put my heart into it!

"All right. Emille, could you open the door for me?" I said to the bunny girl.

"O-Of course," she replied before complying with my request.

“I believe we’re done here. The exit’s that way,” I snickered, pointing to the door.

This got Mr. Gabbs even more flustered. “W-Wait! Please wait! I have another suggestion! I’ll buy up your whole stock of matches for however much you want! Just name your price! How’s that sound, kid—I mean, sir?”

He’d suddenly started acting all polite, as well as putting his hands together in a beseeching gesture and fixing me with a subservient smile.

“Sorry, but I’d actually quite like to keep on selling my ‘little matches,’ as you called them earlier. And I’m going to sell them here in Ninoritch—a town that has a bright future ahead of it,” I declared, refusing his offer for the umpteenth time while attempting to brag a little with that last remark.

“Shiro...” Karen breathed, and she sounded like she’d been moved by my words.

Everyone else immediately offered their thoughts too.

“Mister Shiro...” Aina cried.

“Damn, man...” Raiya said, sounding all choked up. “You’re the best.”

“Well said, Shiro,” Nesca declared sleepily.

“Shiro, meow! You’re awesome!” Kilpha cheered.

“You truly are, Mr. Shiro, sir,” Rolf agreed with a nod.

“I knew it,” Emille announced. “You really *are* in love with me, aren’t you, mister?”

But Mr. Gabbs wasn’t giving up just yet. “W-Well, how about this, sir? We can help you set up a shop in the capital,” he suggested. “And we can get our adventurers to gather up all the materials you need. Would you please accept this offer?”

“This is starting to get old,” I sighed. “Thanks to a certain someone, I have decided to only do business with people I trust from now on. Of course, since—unlike me—you’re not a ‘total idiot,’ I’m sure you understand. You can see yourself out.”

Mr. Gabbs let out a frustrated noise. “M-Miss Mayor! Let’s forget all about the matches. Why don’t we discuss the possibility of us setting up a branch here —”

“I believe I have already stated that I am no longer interested in having your guild in my town,” Karen said curtly.

Having been rejected by both Karen and me, all Mr. Gabbs could do was stand there and repeatedly open and close his mouth. It was a pretty comical sight, and Raiya—who’d been watching the scene from off to one side—couldn’t hold in his amusement at this display any longer and burst out laughing.

“What an idiot!” he guffawed. “You got too greedy and you’ve ended up with nothing!”

“Meow-ha-ha, just look at him! That old man’s face is so funny!” Kilpha joined in.

“Shut *up*!” Mr. Gabbs shrieked angrily. “It’s none of your damn business, you third-rate adventurers!”

“Hey, what did you just call us?” Raiya retorted. He cracked his knuckles and started walking toward Mr. Gabbs, evidently intending to punch the man in the face.

“Raiya, please don’t!” I exclaimed, hurriedly stepping in to try and stop him.

“Hey, man—” he started, but I interrupted him.

“Violence isn’t the answer,” I told him. “It’s—”

This time, he was the one who cut me off. “So why do *you* get to punch him, but I can’t?” he said, frowning.

“We can say I punched him for the both of us. How about that?” I suggested.

“Damn, you really are a smooth talker, man. Fine, fine. My knuckle sandwich is too good for a scumbag like him anyway. Hey, you piece of trash,” Raiya said, addressing Mr. Gabbs as he grabbed him by the collar. “Get the hell out of here and scurry back to your beloved capital.”

“S-Stop this—” the man started protesting, but it was in vain.

“And off you go,” Raiya said as he literally threw the man out through the main door, then slammed it shut behind him. Mr. Gabbs spent the next few minutes pounding on the door to be let back in, but he eventually gave up and the noises from outside stopped.

So that was the negotiator the Maze Marauders had sent here, huh? They clearly had a severe lack of competent staff. Or maybe his strategy of threatening people and taking advantage of their weaknesses in order to make them accept his crazy demands had worked up until now? Either way, I didn’t care. I doubted I’d have to deal with him ever again.

“Shiro, I’m so sorry,” Karen said, coming up to me and bowing deeply.

I waved my hands in front of my chest to indicate that it was all right. “Please don’t worry about it. It must have been tough on you too. Did he try anything?”

“He...” she said hesitantly. “He put his hand on my chest,” she admitted after a few seconds.

“Hey, Aina,” I said to the little girl to grab her attention. “Do you have anything hard and preferably sharp near you? Something that could be used, say, to kill someone?”

Aina simply looked at me and made a sort of confused noise in response to my request.

“I’ll come with you, man,” Raiya said.

“Mr. Shiro, sir,” Rolf piped up. “You may use this, if you wish.” He pointed at his mace, which definitely looked like it could crack open a skull.

“There’s no way he’ll be able to wield that huge mace of yours, Rolf,” Raiya butted in. “Hand it to me and get him another weapon.”

“I can give Shiro my dagger, meow!” Kilpha suggested eagerly, then promptly handed me the weapon before sliding her index finger lengthwise across her throat in the universal throat-slitting gesture. “Go get him, meow!”

“We will,” Raiya assured her. “Leave it to us, Kilpha. C’mon, man. Let’s go!”

“Right!” I said with a determined nod.

“Don’t go doing anything stupid now,” Nesca interjected, sounding

exasperated. “Just forget about that fool.”

“Yes, ma’am!” the rest of us said in unison.

Just as our little improvised skit came to its natural conclusion, the door of the guildhall opened. Was it Mr. Gabbs skulking back in? I turned around cautiously, but thankfully, it wasn’t him. The person who’d opened the door was the female adventurer who had visited my store a few days prior.

“Excuse me,” she said as she walked in. “I was told the mayor of this town was here, so I hurried over. Which one of you is the mayor?” The woman looked around the room at all of us, clearly unsure who the mayor was.

“That would be me,” Karen said. “And you are...”

The woman straightened up and bowed. “My name is Ney Mirage,” she said, introducing herself. “I am a messenger from the Fairy’s Blessing Adventurers’ Guild.”

On hearing this, Raiya let out an impressed whistle. “That’s the biggest guild in the land,” he whispered to me.

“I’m Karen Sankareka, the mayor of Ninoritch,” Karen said, introducing herself to the woman. “Might I inquire what business brings you to my town?”

“Oh, there’s no need to look so wary,” Ney assured us. “It’s nothing major. I simply came to ask whether you would kindly allow us to set up a branch of the Fairy’s Blessing guild here.”

We were all too stunned to speak.

“*What?!*” we all cried in unison after a long pause.

Chapter Thirteen: The Fairy's Blessing Adventurers' Guild

The Fairy's Blessing Adventurers' Guild wanted to set up a branch in Ninoritch. This statement, uttered by Ney Mirage, sent everyone in the room into a deep state of shock. Emille seemed particularly affected by this news. After all, a potential new business rival had appeared only moments after Mr. Gabbs had been sent packing. She assumed the same menacing stance as earlier.

"You wish to set up a branch of the Fairy's Blessing guild in Ninoritch?" Karen asked once she'd composed herself again.

"Yes, indeed," Ney confirmed. "We would usually observe all the proper formalities before making such a request, but I happened to hear through the grapevine that the Maze Marauders were also interested in setting up a branch here, so I decided to come over straight away. I sincerely apologize for the suddenness of the proposal, but if it's all right with you, could we discuss the matter?"

"Karen!" Emille jumped in. "You can't! As your friend, I really think you shouldn't listen to her."

It seemed like she was only Karen's "friend" when it suited her. It was actually quite funny watching the bunny girl's attitude toward Karen turn on a dime.

"Oh? Are you perhaps an employee of this guild?" Ney asked Emille.

"Yes, I am. And what are you gonna do about it, huh?" the bunny girl answered rather aggressively.

"You are? Oh, that's a relief," Ney said. "That saves me some time and effort. I actually have a proposition for your guild as well."

"A proposition?" Emille asked warily.

"Yes, indeed. My guildmaster wants to know if it would be possible to make

your guild a subsidiary of our own, thereby turning it into the branch of the Fairy's Blessing guild that we plan to set up here. Would that be all right with you? If you accept, I guarantee your salary will be much higher as a result."

"A higher salary?"

I could almost hear Emille's wariness dissolving the moment Ney had started talking about her prospective salary. Well, she did like money, after all. I'm sure she wouldn't need too much convincing to accept the proposal.

"F-For real?! You really mean it?! My salary would go up?" the bunny girl said excitedly.

"Yes, indeed," Ney confirmed with a nod.

Emille let out a little squeal of excitement.

"I can promise you it'll be at least five times your current salary," Ney added.

"F-Five times..." Emille gasped, and in a flash, she was kowtowing on the floor. "I accept! From this day onward, the Silver Moon guild is a branch of the Fairy's Blessing guild!" she said, immediately agreeing to the terms that had been offered.

Even Ney seemed taken aback by this sudden change in attitude. "W-Well, thank you for your prompt reply. But please hold on for a moment. I still haven't discussed the proposal with the mayor."

"Karen!" Emille pleaded with her "friend" desperately. "You'd better accept her deal! This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity!"

Karen let out a long "Hmmm" and shot me a couple of glances. It seemed like she wasn't quite sure what to say to the offer. She must've still been on guard after Mr. Gabbs had flung all those crazy demands at her earlier, and slightly worried that the same thing might happen again. Or at least, that's what I thought.

"Shiro, what do you think?" she said suddenly.

Wait, why was she asking for *my* opinion?! All right, Shiro, stay frosty. Trying to sound as calm as possible, I said, "How about we listen to her proposal before deciding anything?"

I'd already noticed how polite Ney was when she'd visited my shop a couple of days earlier. She certainly didn't seem like a bad person.

"Hm, good idea," Karen said, then turned to Ney. "Okay, messenger, I shall listen to your proposal in my office. Please follow me."

"Thank you kindly," Ney said.

"Shiro..." Karen said, turning to me once more.

"What is it?" I asked.

"I'm sorry to inconvenience you even further, but could you come along too?"

"Me?" I asked, somewhat surprised.

"I would also like you to join us," Ney added. "Our guild wishes to request your help regarding a certain matter."

"My help?" I said.

What would a huge guild need a two-bit item merchant's help with? Hopefully, they weren't also after the selling rights to the matches.

"All right," I relented. "I'll tag along. Aina, can you run the store on your own while I'm dealing with this?"

"Of course, Mister Shiro!" the little girl answered cheerily. "I am your employee, after all! Leave it to me!"

"Thank you. I really can count on you," I praised her. "I'm leaving the shop in your hands, then."

"Okay!" she chirped.

And with that, I headed off with Karen and Ney to sit in on their negotiations.

"All right. Could you please outline your guild's proposal for us?" Karen said as soon as we'd sat down in her office. I was seated next to Karen, while Ney was on the couch across the table from us.

"Yes, certainly. First, allow me to explain why our guild would like to set up a branch in your town," Ney started. "Of course, we are interested in the large forest just east of Ninoritch. There are, after all, a noteworthy number of monsters in there, as well as some rare and precious herbs. On top of that..."

At first, she only told us stuff Karen and I already knew. To cut a long story short, a lot of monsters that people from the capital were interested in lived in the forest next to Ninoritch. There were also a number of rare herbs that doctors—as well as alchemists—would pay good money to get their hands on. Her next sentence, however, came as news to us.

“A few days ago, one of our adventuring parties found a map in a dungeon, and from what we can tell, it seems to show the continent as it was in the Ancient Magic Civilization era.”

“A map, you say?”

“Yes, indeed. It is the first time in history that such a map has been discovered. Our guild even considers it the discovery of the century. But here comes the important part...” She paused, and you could tell she was excited. She slammed her hands down on the table and leaned forward before continuing. “According to this map, there are lots of ruins from the Ancient Magic Civilization era—mazes and temples and all that—on the eastern edge of the continent. In other words, slap-bang in the forest next to Ninoritch!”

“Wh-What?! Is that *true*?” Karen asked, suddenly standing up. This nugget of info had her so excited, she was shaking a little.

“It is! The Maze Marauders must have caught wind of it too. They most likely wanted to set up their own guild branch here so that *they’d* be the only ones with access to the ruins. They probably tried to force you into agreeing to their demands, but I can see you rejected them. What a foolish bunch they are.”

She chuckled before carrying on. “The Fairy’s Blessing guild plan on focusing all our efforts on fully exploring the forest. The sooner, the better. That’s why we’ve been looking for a town—or even just a village—where we can set up a branch to achieve this. And I have personally made the decision that Ninoritch would be a good place to use as our base of operations for this mission.”

“Why here?” I asked out of sheer curiosity.

“There are several reasons. First of all, I thought that if we managed to turn the Silver Moon—a guild that only exists in this town—into our Ninoritch branch, we wouldn’t need to go through all the rigmarole of building a brand-new guildhall, which would save us precious time in our efforts to explore the

forest.”

“That does make sense, yes,” Karen said, nodding.

“And the other reason is...” Ney paused for a moment and fixed her gaze on me. “I am very interested in ‘Shiro’s Shop.’ All of your items are wonderful and I am convinced they would help our adventurers tremendously.”

“I see. So Shiro was the deciding factor in your decision, hm?” Karen summarized. “I would also like to know what exactly you want Shiro to help you with.”

“It’s rather a simple request, actually,” Ney replied, before addressing me again. “We would like you to open up a branch store in the guildhall. Would that be possible?”

And there I’d been, scared that she’d ask me to hand over the selling rights to the matches, when all she actually wanted was for me to open up a brand-new shop?

“Naturally, you don’t need to answer right away. We can discuss it again at a later date, once the mayor has accepted our proposal, if that is indeed what she chooses to do. But we would like for you to please consider this matter,” Ney said, and she bowed deeply to me.

She was so unlike the aggressive Mr. Gabbs. It was pretty impressive how different these two guild envoys were.

“Mayor Sankareka, would you please allow us to set up a branch of our guild in Ninoritch?” the Fairy’s Blessing guild representative asked earnestly.

“After hearing your reasoning, I feel like I should be the one asking you to do us the honor of opening up a branch of your guild here. I do have one question, though: what are your conditions for setting up a branch in Ninoritch?” Karen asked warily.

“Conditions?” she said, looking puzzled. “I’m afraid I don’t follow...”

“Before you happened upon us, we were in talks with an envoy from the Maze Marauders. He told us he wanted his guild to be exempt from taxes, for us to build the guildhall ourselves, and also—”

“For me to ‘hand over’ the selling rights to the matches,” I said, finishing her sentence.

On hearing this, Ney could only stare at us open-mouthed for a few moments. “He made those demands? Even though *he* was the one who wanted to set up a guild branch here?” she asked, unable to keep her incredulity out of her voice.

“He was totally shameless,” I groaned. “He even went as far as making fun of the adventurers who live here. Oh, and he called me an idiot.”

“He also decided he’d have a quick feel of my chest,” Karen added sourly.

“What atrocious behavior. Rest assured, you won’t have any nonsense like that from us. The Silver Moon guild has already agreed to become our subsidiary here, so you won’t need to build a new guildhall, and we plan on paying all the taxes we are liable for in full. The only request we make is that you source some workers who can aid us in constructing the lodgings for our adventurers, though of course, these workers will be properly remunerated. Ah, and we will need some land to construct these lodgings on too. How does all that sound?”

Karen nodded and held out her right hand so that they could seal the deal with a handshake. “It would be my pleasure,” she said.

“Thank you kindly for accepting,” Ney replied as they shared a firm handshake.

And so, the “puny” little Silver Moon guild became affiliated with the country’s biggest Adventurers’ Guild, the Fairy’s Blessing, by becoming their subsidiary branch in Ninoritch.

Chapter Fourteen: Hesitation

On hearing that a branch of the Fairy's Blessing guild was coming to Ninoritch, the townsfolk were ecstatic. Karen told me the town planning process to accommodate the influx of people the new guild branch would bring to the area was well underway down at the town hall, with people arguing left and right over which to build first: a tavern or an inn. The good thing about being a little town out in the country was that there was no shortage of wood or land to construct new buildings on. Apparently, as soon as the adventurers' lodgings the Fairy's Blessing guild had requested were all built, the town planned on building a new inn, a tavern, a blacksmith's, and a tool shop. Construction on the lodgings hadn't even started yet, but the entire town was a hive of activity.

Meanwhile, I was still hard at work running my store.

"Thank you for your purchase!"

Maybe word had gotten out that the Fairy's Blessing guild planned on setting up a branch here, because there seemed to be more and more adventurers in town with each passing day. I mentioned this to Raiya and he told me that most of them were members of the Fairy's Blessing guild. The town was much livelier for it and my shop was doing better than ever before. I was, however, a little worried about something.

"Hey, Aina, can you grab that big box of matches over there for me?" I said to the little girl.

She didn't answer.

"Aina?" I called again.

Still no answer.

"Hey, Aina!"

"Ah!" she squeaked in surprise. "S-Sorry, Mister Shiro. Um..." She looked hesitant. "You wanted a broom, right?"

“Nope. Matches,” I said. “That big box right there.”

“O-Okay!” the little girl answered. “I’ll be back in a second.”

There had been more and more occasions where I’d caught Aina spacing out, completely lost in her own thoughts. She’d always been extremely hardworking, so this was very out of character for her. I wondered what was on her mind.

“Thank you for your purchase!”

The last customer in the shop left, and even though it was a bit early, I decided to close up for the day.

“Should we close early today, Aina?” I asked the little girl, but again, she didn’t answer straight away. “Aina!” I called, raising my voice.

“Huh?” she said, the surprise in her voice apparent once more. “Uh, yeah, sure!”

She’d had her head in the clouds again. As her employer, I figured I should probably get to the bottom of what was troubling her if I saw an opportunity to broach the subject.

“All right. You can make a start on the cleaning up,” I told her.

“Okay,” she said with a nod, then did exactly that.

I went over to the front door and hung a sign on it which read “Closed for the Day,” before returning to the counter to start calculating the day’s profits, which involved me counting up all the coins, one by one. My total sales for the day came to 52 silver coins and 4,560 copper coins, or 976,000 yen. The past few days had yielded around the same amount. Almost a million yen a day. *One million yen a day*. If I managed to keep up these kinds of numbers for a whole year, I’d end up with 360,000,000 yen...

C’mon, other world, you’re spoiling me way too much!

“All righty,” I mumbled to myself.

Aina finished tidying the store just as I was transferring the proceeds of the day into my inventory. Now was my time to shine. I’d ask Aina what was on her mind and offer her some pertinent advice, like the reliable adult I was. But just as I was about to open my mouth...

“Um, Mister Shiro?”

...Aina came over to talk to me herself.

“Hm? What’s wrong?” I said.

“Um...” she murmured hesitantly. “I, um...”

She clearly wanted to tell me something, but it seemed as if she didn’t quite know how to put whatever it was into words, and she ended up hanging her head and looking like she might burst into tears at any moment. But after a few seconds of hesitation, she clutched the hem of her skirt and looked me in the eye again, as if she’d finally found her resolve.

“Um, uh...” she stammered. “M-Mister Shiro...”

“Yes?” I said.

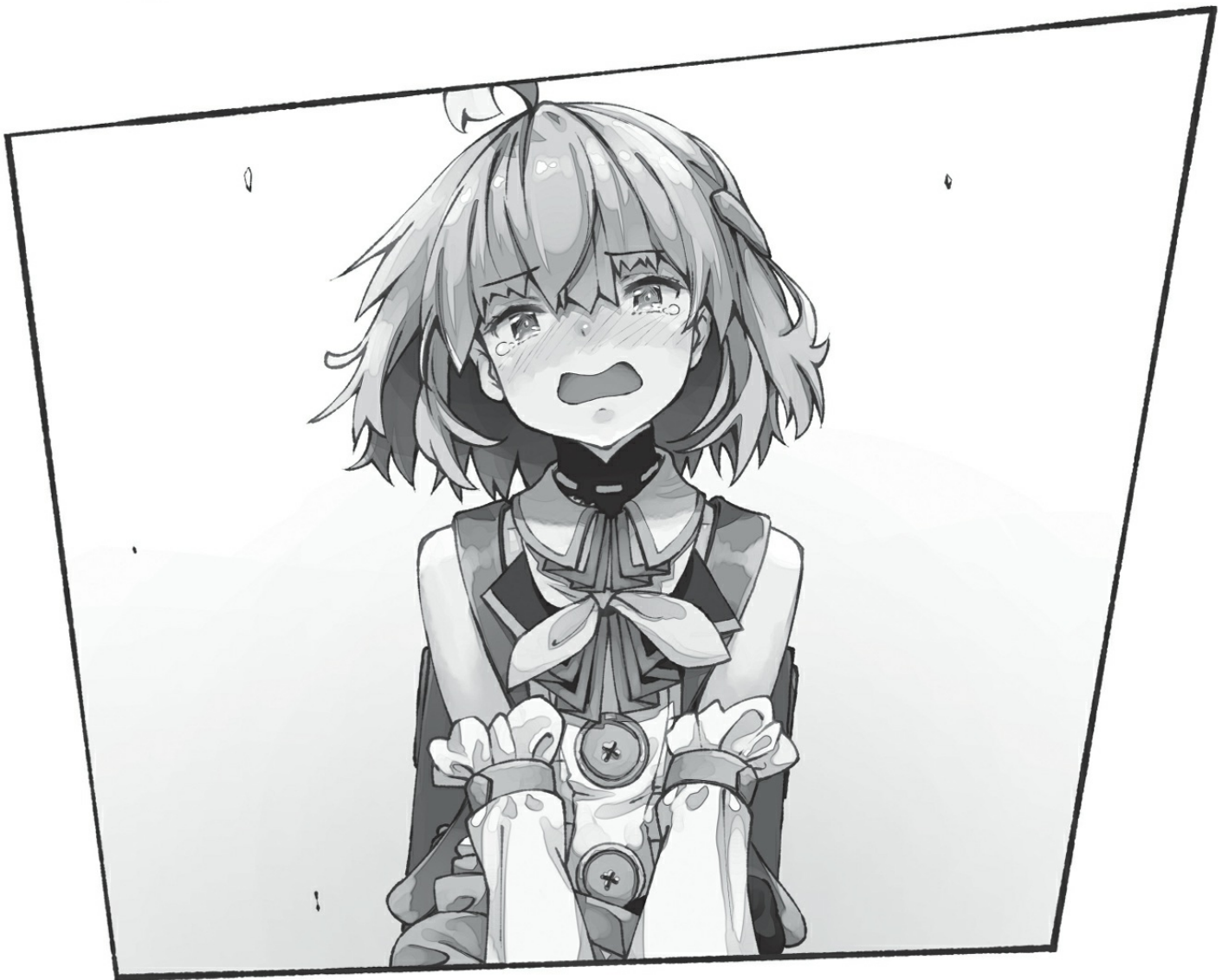
“It’s, uh...” she said haltingly. “Can you...”

“Can I...” I prompted.

“Can you...” she tried again. “Can you...”

Tears had formed in her eyes and the more she spoke, the more her voice trembled. But she didn’t break eye contact with me and she finally managed to summon up the courage to ask her question.

“Mister Shiro...” she repeated. “Can you please lend me some money?”





Mister Shiro... It echoed in my head. *Can you please lend me some money?*

I blinked in surprise at her question. Aina, meanwhile, kept on staring at me, still on the verge of tears, her entire body shaking. She was probably worried her request would make me hate her, but even in spite of this, she'd mustered up all of her courage to speak these words, fully prepared for whatever consequences they might bring. I hadn't known her for all that long, but I knew that was what must've gone through her head. And it was only natural for me to know what she was thinking—after all, she was pretty much by my side all day every day at the shop. But even so, I was so taken aback by this sudden request, I found it difficult to find any words in response. This prompted Aina to stare at me even more intensely as she waited for my answer, but I wasn't really sure how to reply.

"Um..." I said before trailing off. Aina's body twitched and the dam finally burst, sending tears streaming down her face. I hadn't done it on purpose, but I'd made a little girl cry. Oops. I really needed to say something.

"Y-You need money, is that it? How much?" I managed to get out.

"I-I'm so sorry, Mister Shiro!" Aina wailed between sobs, burying her face in her hands. "I-I don't want..."—sob—"I don't want to bother you! I'm so..."—sob—"I'm so, so sorry!"

"H-Hey, it's okay!" I quickly reassured her. "You're not bothering me at all. Just calm down, okay? Come on, let's sit down."

She was still sobbing away, so I grabbed her hand and took her over to the nearest chair. Once she'd sat down, I started gently rubbing her back in an attempt to stem the flow of tears.

"It's fine. Everything's fine, Aina," I said, trying to calm her down.

"Mishter Shiro..." she sniffed, her speech slightly garbled by her sobbing. "I'm bothering you..."

"Hey, it's all good. Don't worry about me," I said, trying to soothe her. "It was hard asking me that, wasn't it? You're really brave, Aina. You did so well. You

really did.”

I’d already guessed why she was asking me for money. From the day I’d first met her, I could tell how much Aina really, really loved her mother, and there was only one reason why she would need money.

“Did something happen to your mom?” I asked.

Her expression immediately changed to one of surprise, almost as if she was wordlessly asking how I’d known. It didn’t stay on her face for long, though, as tears instantly welled up in her eyes and she started sobbing again. Looks like I was right.

“Aina, I promise I’ll do everything I can to help you,” I told her. “Can you please just tell me what’s happened?”

Her crying continued unabated, but she eventually gave me a little nod. Almost at the same moment, the shop door swung open and Raiya walked in.

“Hey, man! I see you’ve closed up for the day. Wanna go grab a bite togeth—” He cut himself off mid-word as his gaze landed on Aina’s tear-streaked face. “Oh, crud. Looks like you’re in the middle of something. My bad,” he apologized, scratching his head awkwardly.

I noticed Rolf standing behind him. The two men sheepishly looked at each other.

“Raiya—” I started, but he cut me off.

“I’m really sorry!” he said. “I saw the closed sign on the door, but I noticed the light was still on inside, so I just thought you—”

This time, he was the one who was interrupted—by a female voice calling out to me from behind him.

“Shiro! I want to ask you something regarding the town’s...”

Karen entered the shop. What the heck? There was way too much going on here!

“It can probably wait until tomorrow,” she said as her eyes darted from Aina—who was still crying—to me, then to Raiya and Rolf. “What’s wrong with Aina?”

“Dunno,” Raiya replied. “We just got here too. Right, Rolf?”

“Indeed,” the battle priest said. “We planned on inviting Mr. Shiro to have dinner with us, but when we came in, we saw that Little Miss Aina was crying.”

“What’s wrong with the girlie, man?” Raiya said, addressing me this time.

“I don’t know,” I told him. “She was just about to tell me when you guys showed up,” I said.

“A-Ah, sorry for interruptin’, man,” Raiya said. “We can leave if you want.”

“What do you think, Aina?” I asked the little girl softly. “Do you want it to be just the two of us here?”

She shook her head. “It’s...” she started. “It’s okay. I don’t mind...”—she hiccuped—“...if Miss Karen and Mister Raiya and Mister Rolf stay...”

“Okay,” I said with a nod as I stroked her hair, before turning and addressing the others. “Well, you heard the young lady. Do you mind staying and chipping in with some advice?”

“S-Sure thing!” Raiya said, though he didn’t sound very sure. “Leave it to us! Rolf’s actually pretty good with this sorta stuff,” he declared before turning to the battle priest. “We’re counting on you, man.”

“It is merely my role as a priest to help those who are lost. I cannot guarantee that I will be able to provide the most appropriate advice for the situation, but please do not hesitate to explain the matter to me.”

“As mayor of this town, it is also my job to help my citizens,” Karen chimed in. “Please tell us what’s wrong, Aina.”

“See, Aina? Everyone here wants to help you,” I said to the little girl. “Me included, of course. I’ll listen to everything you have to say. So can you tell us what happened?”

“Y-Yeah,” she eventually said quietly, giving a little nod and wiping away her tears with her sleeve. She brought a hand up to her chest and tried to calm her breathing a bit.

“It’s, uh...” she started hesitantly. “It’s my mama...” She grabbed my hand, and I squeezed her little hand back. “My mama’s sick,” she finally told us in a

shaky voice.

Intermission: Aina's Past

It all started when Aina was four. The city she had been living in up to that point had burned down in the war, and her house and all her favorite toys had turned to ashes. She was really sad. The house where she had made so many happy memories was no more. But what made her saddest of all was when they came to take her papa away to fight in the war. They said it was his duty as a citizen or something along those lines.

"I'll be back soon," her papa had told her with a pat on the head. He'd then turned to the little girl's mama and hugged her. "Take good care of Aina," he said to her.

The war lasted for six months. Even many years later, she still remembered very vividly the day they announced the war was over. There was a huge hubbub outside, like it was a festival day or something.

A year passed, then two. Her papa still didn't come home.

When she was six, her mama suggested they should move to another town, but the little girl refused to leave. They couldn't! They had to wait for her papa to come home! If they went off somewhere else, what would he do when he got back? When the little girl insisted she wanted to stay, her mama started crying silently. With the tears still flowing, she hugged her daughter really tight.

Aina loved her mama. She didn't want to see her cry. So she agreed to move town. They put all of their belongings into two backpacks—one small, one large. The small one was Aina's, and the large one was her mama's. Her mama took her by the hand and they traveled from country to country until they finally arrived here in Ninoritch. Aina asked her mama why she had decided to stay in such a small town out in the middle of nowhere, and her mama replied that it was because there would be no war here. She told the little girl she didn't want to lose anyone else she loved.

Life here wasn't easy, though. Aina's mama had to work in the fields, and because she had never done that kind of work before, her hands ended up

covered in blisters. They also didn't have a lot to eat. Her mama always made Aina eat most of the food, while she only ate a little bit herself.

But during their second year in Ninoritch, something terrible happened. Aina's mama fell sick to the point where she couldn't even stand up anymore. She told the little girl she was sorry, but Aina didn't understand what she was sorry for. *She* should have been the one apologizing! It was her fault her mama had to work so hard she became sick. She started picking flowers and got herself a seller's permit at the town hall with what little money she had saved up. From dawn until dusk, she would walk around the market and sell flowers to passersby.

That's when she met Shiro. Not only did he buy lots of flowers from her, he even hired her to work in his store. Finally, she could help her mama! She thanked all of the gods she knew the names of for letting her meet Shiro. He would often treat her to nice food, but the little girl always only ate half of it so that she could take the leftovers home to her mama. But whenever the little girl gave the delicious food to her mama, she would just shake her head and claim she had already eaten before Aina had gotten home. Aina knew she was lying, but no matter what she did, her mama refused to eat the food Aina had brought home. The little girl finally understood where she got her own stubbornness from. Aina's first take-home pay was 10 silver coins and she knew immediately what she would spend it on. She had once overheard an ad-vent-you-rer say, "Potions can heal everything. Don't tell me you didn't know that?" These words had given her hope.

But unfortunately, the town's doctor didn't sell potions. Aina decided to ask around the ad-vent-you-rers to see if any of them was willing to sell her a potion. She had the 10 silver coins Shiro had given her, as well as 23 copper coins she had managed to save up on her own. She had to ask lots and lots of ad-vent-you-rers, but the other day, she'd finally managed to find someone who would sell her a potion—though it had cost her all of her savings. Cradling the small bottle carefully in her arms, she rushed back home to her mama. She pretended Shiro had given her the potion and made her mama drink it.

But nothing happened. Aina felt as if she had suddenly plunged into a deep, dark abyss. What could she do? How could she make it so her mama wasn't sick

anymore? She needed money. If she had money, she could take her mama to a big city, where there was a chance she could get some better treatment for her sickness. But Aina didn't have a lot of people she could rely on for help. There was only one person she could think of who she could turn to.

Aina loved Shiro very much, and she was scared he would start hating her if she requested this big thing from him. But she loved her mama even more, and what scared her the most was her mama dying. *God, I can bear it if Shiro hates me*, she thought, offering up a silent prayer. *But please, please, please, save my mama.*

Aina gritted her teeth, steadied her shaking knees as best she could, and clutched the hem of her skirt tightly. She mustered up all of her courage and finally managed to ask her boss the question. "Mister Shiro..." she had said. "Can you please lend me some money?"

She was fully aware Shiro might hate her for asking him this, and that his reaction might simply be to look down on her. She could take that. But he didn't. He simply stroked her hair reassuringly.

Chapter Fifteen: The Mystery Illness

“I see. So your mom’s sick, huh?”

Aina hadn’t stopped crying the whole time she was explaining to us what had happened. The parts about her mother falling ill; her spending all her money on a potion from an adventurer, which ended up having no effect at all; that she wanted to take her mom to a big city so she could get proper treatment for her illness; how that was why she needed money—she’d sobbed convulsively throughout.

“I-I’m so sorry, Mister Shiro...” she sniffed. “I’m so sorry...”

For some reason, Raiya—who’d also been listening to her story—was fuming. “Who was it?” he seethed. “Who’s the fathead who sold that potion to this little girlie?”

While Rolf next to him didn’t say anything, it was easy to see he was equally incensed.

“Girlie,” Raiya said to Aina. “D’you remember what this person who sold you that potion looked like?”

Aina shook her head.

“Oh. Well, if you see that adventurer again, you come and tell me, you hear?” he continued. “I’ll make sure to punch ’em right in the face for you...” he said, before adding, “About a hundred times should do it.”

Aina didn’t seem to understand why he was so worked up, and all she could do was blink at him, a confused look painted across her face.

“Little Miss Aina, I am sorry to say this, but that potion you purchased would never have worked on your mother’s illness,” Rolf told her.

“Huh?” she uttered, her eyes widening.

“Healing potions can only cure external wounds,” Rolf explained. “There are other types of potions—cure potions, for instance, which counteract poison—

but there is one thing all potions have in common: they cannot cure illnesses.”

“But what about the potion I bought?” Aina asked. “That ad-vent-you-rer person said if mama drank it, her sickness would go away. I was told if she drank it, she would be well again...”

“As a fellow adventurer, I feel terribly ashamed to say this, but...” Rolf hesitated momentarily. “The adventurer who sold you that potion deceived you. I sincerely apologize,” he said, even though he hadn’t been the one who’d swindled Aina.

Now I understood why Raiya was so mad. That adventurer had taken advantage of the fact Aina was a child to trick her into parting with good money for a potion that was never going to work.

“Oh. So I was tricked,” the little girl said in disbelief. “Oh.”

She started sobbing again, though it was more out of frustration this time. I gently rubbed her back again and tried to reassure her that everything would be fine. Based on what Rolf had said, I had a hard time believing what the adventurer had sold to Aina was even a real potion in the first place. A quick look at Rolf and Raiya’s faces told me they were likely thinking the same thing.

“Screw this!” Raiya roared as he kicked over the nearest chair. It must have been his way of letting out his anger, but he was an adventurer and his kick was very forceful, meaning the chair—that I actually kind of liked—smashed to pieces on impact.

“I’m gonna go look for that scumbag,” Raiya announced. “Rolf, you stay here and support them.”

“Understood, Mr. Raiya, sir,” the battle priest replied.

Raiya rushed out of the store, bellowing a war cry. I watched him go, half-hoping he’d find the “scumbag” and half-hoping he wouldn’t, because I was afraid this might quickly turn into a murder case.

“I’ll let Raiya deal with this adventurer who sold the potion to Aina. I’m going to head over to her house and find out how her mother’s doing,” I announced. “What about you guys?”

Rolf and Karen exchanged a look before nodding.

“I will come along, naturally,” Rolf declared. “Not only was it Mr. Raiya’s wish for me to support you in any way I can, it is also my job as a servant of God to help those who are lost.”

Karen had a resolute expression on her face too. “And as the mayor, it is my job to aid my citizens as best I can. I will also come with you. But first...” She paused and turned to the little girl beside me. “Aina, is the sickness your mother contracted the Decaying Disease?”

That phrase made Aina jolt and her whole body started shaking. She looked up at Karen and nodded. “Yes...” she said slowly. “That’s what the doctor said.”

“I feared that might be the case, but...” Karen said, her shoulders slumping.

“The Decaying Disease...” Rolf whispered with a dark expression on his face.

Seeing the looks on their faces, I instantly knew this “Decaying Disease” was a big deal. “Rolf,” I said to catch his attention. “Could you come with me for a sec?”

“Of course, Mr. Shiro, sir,” he said.

I led him up to the second floor.

“Please be honest with me. What kind of illness is this ‘Decaying Disease’?” I asked him quietly. I didn’t want Aina overhearing our conversation.

Rolf seemed to catch on to my intention, and he replied in an equally low voice. “It is an illness that makes the limbs of the person who has contracted it so weak they can barely move, almost as if they have rotted away inside. Some researchers think it might be a transmissible disease, but even to this day, no one knows what actually causes it. And...” He paused and looked me straight in the eye, a grave expression on his face. “Nearly everyone who contracts the disease dies.”



“This way, Mister Shiro.”

Karen, Rolf, Aina, and I were making our way to the little girl’s house, with Aina out in front, leading the group. We eventually reached the edge of town,

where we found a dilapidated, poky-looking house. I took a look around, but it seemed no one else lived in the area.

“Karen, is this place...” I whispered to her. She immediately understood what I was trying to ask her.

Her face fell. “Her mother probably thought she’d have to leave town if people found out about her disease. My guess is she decided to live all the way out here so the other townsfolk wouldn’t realize she was sick.”

“That’s awful...” I said quietly.

“As the mayor, I feel extremely ashamed about this situation,” she murmured sadly.

Karen explained to me that people who contracted the Decaying Disease tended to get shunned and ostracized by the other townsfolk. Aina and her mother had moved into this run-down house right on the edge of town because they probably had nowhere else to go. I would never agree with the practice of actively excluding people from society, but I did understand the thinking behind it. After all, if it really *were* a contagious disease, simply interacting with someone who’d contracted it might put you at huge risk.

“So Aina walks all the way from here to the shop every day...” I mused as we came to a stop in front of Aina’s house.

“We’re here,” the little girl declared. “This is my house.”

The house was on a bit of a slant and seemed much too small for two people to live in comfortably. There was a small vegetable patch next to the house, where a handful of vegetables that looked like eggplants were growing.

“They’re called ‘eggs-plants,’” Aina said, presumably noticing me staring at them. She picked up an “eggs-plant” and showed it to me. “I make soup from these and eat it with mama,” she said.

“I see. So you’re the one who makes the soup, are you?” I asked her.

“Yeah,” she said with a nod. “Do you want to try some? I’ll make some for you!”

“It’s okay. You don’t need to,” I said quickly, but she shook her head.

“I have to make food for mama anyway, so I can make extra for you! And for Miss Karen and Mister Rolf as well!” she said, plucking two “eggs-plants” off the stem. She carried them up to the front door in both hands, then once she’d taken a deep breath and fixed a smile on her face, she pushed the door open.

“Mama, I’m home!” she announced cheerfully.

I felt a pang in my heart as I watched her walk into the house. That deep breath she’d taken was to calm herself down, and the smile she’d forced onto her face was so her mother wouldn’t worry about her. What a strong girl you are, Aina.

“Mama, we have guests today!” the little girl called out.

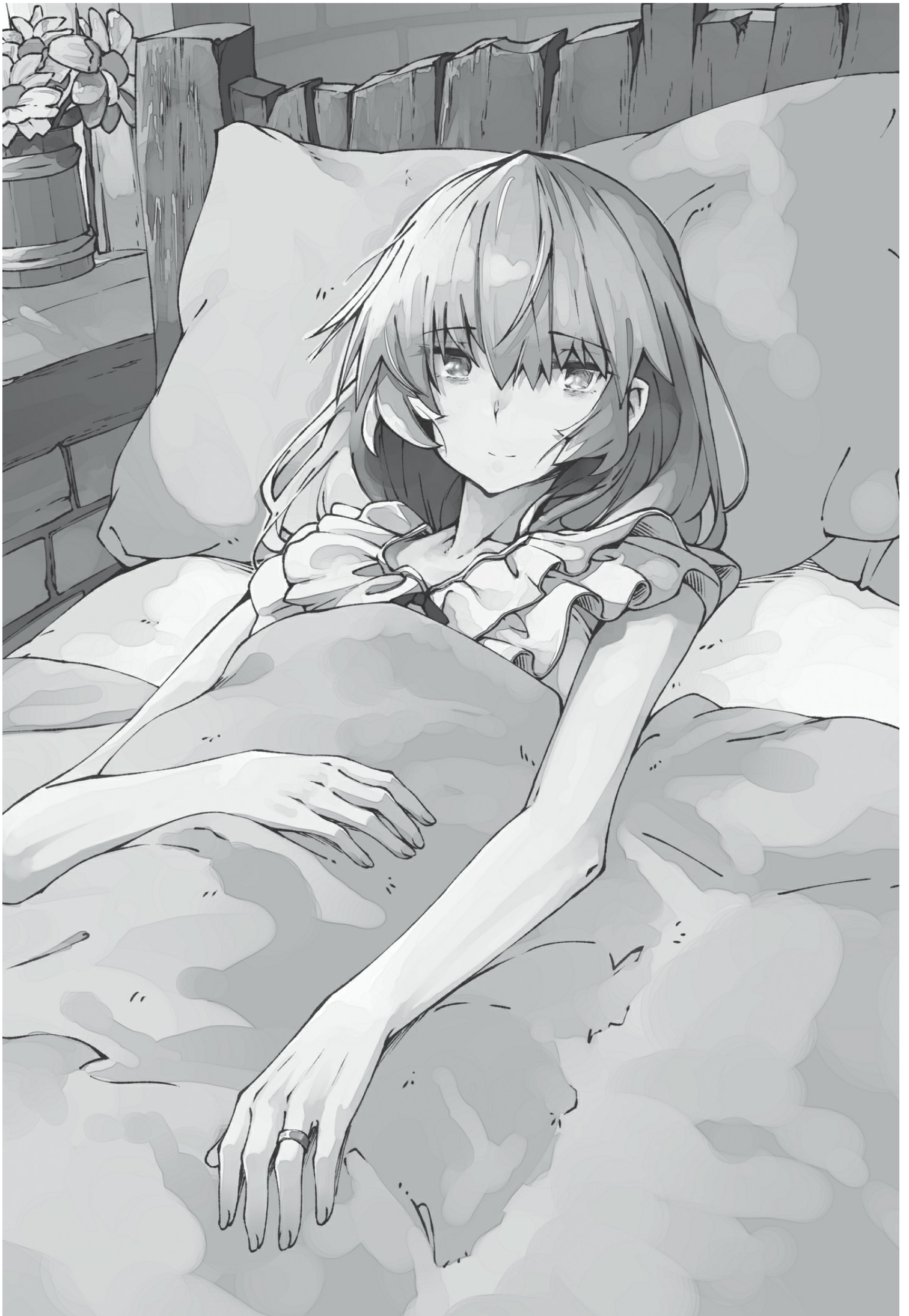
“Oh, gosh. This is rare, isn’t it?” a female voice replied. I thought it was a very gentle-sounding voice.

“I’ll introduce them to you, mama!” Aina said, then she turned to me and beckoned me in with a smile. “Come in, Mister Shiro!”

All righty, then. I slapped my cheeks with both hands to pump myself up. Okay, I was now ready to go. I plastered a cheerful expression on my face, my smile every bit as big as Aina’s.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, ma’am,” I announced as I walked inside, as if I were a door-to-door salesman. “My name is Shiro Amata. Aina helps me out in my shop.” On entering the room, I saw a woman lying in a bed.

“Ah, so *you’re* Shiro,” the woman said. “It’s so nice to finally meet you. I’m Aina’s mother. My name is Stella.”



The beautiful woman—who looked a lot like Aina—gave me a feeble but warm smile. You could immediately tell they were related, as the color—or rather, *colors*—of their eyes was exactly the same. So Aina got her heterochromia from her mother, huh?

“I apologize for showing up unannounced like this,” I said. “Aina’s been helping me out in the shop for a while now, and I’m always meaning to come and introduce myself to you, but...”

Stella laughed gently. “It’s all right. I’m finally getting to meet you. Thank you for always looking after Aina.”

“I’d say it’s more a case of her looking after me!” I said with a smile. “If she wasn’t around, I’d have a hard time running the shop all on my own.”

“Oh, really?” Stella said. “It sounds like you’re working hard, Aina.”

“Yup! I work super-duper hard at Mister Shiro’s shop! I clean all the shelves and I hand the items to the customers!” the little girl chirped.

“Really? What a good little girl you are,” Stella said.

Aina let out an embarrassed laugh. Receiving praise from her mother must have made her really happy. She put the “eggs-plants” down on the table and wrapped her arms around my legs.

“I really, really, *really* like working at Mister Shiro’s shop!” she said cheerfully.

“You’ve been smiling a lot more recently,” Aina’s mother said. “Mama’s happy you’re having so much fun, Aina.”

“Really? You’re happy, mama?” Aina asked, her little face lighting up.

“Yes, really. I’m very happy,” her mother confirmed.

“Yay!” the little girl cheered and she started jumping around excitedly, the floorboards creaking loudly every time her feet landed.

“May I call you Mr. Shiro?” Stella asked me.

“Of course. Or you can just call me Shiro, if you like,” I replied.

“Thank you, but I’ll stick to calling you ‘Mr. Shiro’ if you don’t mind. Oh, and I’d like to apologize for greeting you looking like this,” she said as she looked

down in shame at her nightgown. “Unfortunately, I have trouble standing these days...” A little noise of pain escaped her lips as she tried to sit up.

I hurriedly waved my hands to tell her that getting up really wasn’t necessary. “Ah, please don’t push yourself on my account! You should stay in bed!”

“I can’t just lie around when we have guests...” she said stubbornly.

“Mama, you have to stay in bed!” Aina chided, puffing out her cheeks and pretending to be angry.

“Please don’t mind us,” I insisted. “We’d feel bad if you hurt yourself.”

“Shiro’s right. We’d rather you took it easy,” Karen added. She’d been waiting for a break in the conversation in order to make her long-awaited appearance. Rolf had also followed her into the house after a little while.

“Aina, is this...” her mother said before trailing off, her eyes not moving from Karen.

“She’s the mayor!” the little girl chirped.

“Oh, gosh!” Stella exclaimed, a look of astonishment on her face. Which shouldn’t really have been a surprise, because anyone would be shocked if the mayor of their town suddenly showed up in their house.

“What’s the mayor doing here?” she asked Aina.

“I asked her to bring me here,” Karen jumped in.

This answer seemed to confuse Stella even more.

“Miss Mayor decided to come visit you after Little Miss Aina informed us that you were sick, ma’am,” Rolf explained.

Stella nodded to show that she understood now. “I see. I apologize for making you come all the way over here,” she said.

“No, I should be the one apologizing. I’m the mayor of this town, yet I did nothing to help you even though you are ill. I’m deeply sorry,” Karen said, and she bowed to Stella with her fists clenched in frustration down by her side.

“Please raise your head,” Stella said hurriedly. “I’m very thankful to you for letting us live in your town in the first place.”

“Oh, is that so?” Karen asked after a pause.

“Yes,” Stella confirmed. “Now please stop making that face.”

“All right...” Karen said, composing herself. It only took a moment for her to be back in “stone-cold fox” mode again.

“Anyway, when did you start talking to the mayor, Aina?” Stella asked the little girl. “You never told me this.”

Aina giggled. “Are you surprised?” she asked her mother.

“Well, yes, I am,” her mother admitted. “Very much so.”

“I’ve made lots of friends!” the little girl told her. “There’s Mister Shiro, and Miss Karen, and also Mister Rolf here!”

“It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Miss Stella, ma’am,” Rolf said. “I am a priest and a servant of the sky god, Florine. My name is Rolf.”

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Rolf. Thank you for looking out for my daughter.”

“And then! And then!” Aina continued. “There’s also Mister Raiya, and Miss Nesca, and Miss Kilpha! But they’re not here today. They’re also my friends! They’re all amazing ad-vent-you-rers! So cool, right?” Aina exclaimed, talking about us as if she were boasting about some sort of treasure she’d found.

Stella smiled. She looked incredibly happy. “You’re lucky to have so many friends, Aina,” she said.

“Yup!” the little girl chirped cheerfully. She went over to the bed and clasped her mother’s hand. “I’m super-duper lucky!”

“I’m so glad,” Stella said.

“Did you eat already, mama?” the little girl asked. “I’m gonna make some eggs-plant soup for our guests!”

“Thank you, Aina. I’m so sorry. I should be the one cooking, but...” her mother said wistfully.

“It’s okay! I like cooking, so it’s fine!” the little girl reassured her.

“Thank you. I’ll leave it to you, then. You know, mama’s actually very hungry right now.”

“Are you? So you’ll eat it if I cook it?” Aina asked with a hopeful note in her voice.

“Of course I will,” her mother told her. “I can’t wait to have some of your soup, Aina.”

“Okey dokey! I’ll rustle it up super quick!” Aina wandered off into an adjacent room and returned with a bucket. “I’m going down to the river to get the water!”

“I will help you, Little Miss Aina,” Rolf offered.

“Thanks, Mister Rolf!”

And with that, the two of them headed outside.

Once she’d said goodbye to the pair, Stella turned to Karen. “Mayor Sankareka, I apologize if I seem rude for asking this, but is it possible for you to leave the two of us alone for a moment? There’s something I’d like to talk to Mr. Shiro about,” she said.

“Of course,” Karen said with a nod, before turning to me. “I’ll head out and leave you two to it. I’ll be waiting outside, so just shout when you’re done, Shiro.”

“Sure thing,” I replied.

Karen headed outside, leaving me alone in the room with Stella.

Something she wanted to talk to me about, huh? It must have been to do with Aina. Maybe she wanted to ask me about her working conditions.

“So what is it you wanted to talk to me about?” I asked.

“I...” Stella said, before pausing briefly and starting again. “I wanted to ask you if you could take care of Aina.”

“Take care of her?” I asked, thoroughly confused by her request.

Stella’s expression turned grimly serious. “Yes. When I die, could you look after her?”

When I die, could you look after her? The words reverberated around my head. I didn’t know what to say. After a few seconds of wordless silence, all I

could manage to blurt out was: “You’re joking, right?”

“No,” Stella said. “I’m not. I’m *extremely* serious.”

Her firmness and the look in her eyes told me she really was.

“I apologize for bringing it up so suddenly,” she continued. “But it seems I don’t have a lot of time left...” She paused and stared down at her legs. “Did Aina tell you about my illness?”

“Y-Yes. Just before we came over. She said...” I hesitated. “She said you have the Decaying Disease.”

“Did she...” Stella started, a wistful note in her voice. “Did she cry?”

“She did,” I admitted. “A lot, actually. She’s probably been bottling up those feelings for a while.”

“I thought as much,” she murmured. She closed her eyes, seemingly to stop herself from crying. “I’m...” she started, opening her eyes after a few seconds. “I’m a bad mother. I knew Aina had been pushing herself a lot recently. She’s doing her best to support the both of us, now that I can’t work anymore.”

“She really is,” I said, nodding.

“It’s been really painful seeing her like that,” Stella admitted. “I’m her mother, yet I can’t do a thing for her. But the most painful thing of all is seeing her force herself to smile in front of me.”

“Force herself?” I said.

“Yes. She probably doesn’t want me to worry about her as I’m sick, so she always puts up a brave front whenever she’s around me. She forces herself to smile, and tells me I have nothing to worry about. Seeing her like that is really heartbreaking. What a pathetic excuse for a mother I am...” she sighed. “But recently, she’s been acting a little differently. I’ve noticed that she’s been smiling a lot more whenever she’s talking to me about one specific thing—and it’s not the forced smile she’s learned to put on either. I hadn’t seen her smile so genuinely in a long time. I asked her why she was so happy once, and she said it was because she’d met ‘a really nice man.’ She was talking about you, Mr. Shiro.”

Her expression grew softer and softer as she talked. I could see how much love she had for Aina just by looking at her face.

“Aina only smiles like that when she talks about you. She’s been forcing herself to smile for the longest time, but I finally get to see her *real* smile again, even if it’s only occasionally. She says things like, ‘Mama, today, this happened...’ and ‘Mama, today, Mr. Shiro did this!’ I’ve always found it puzzling *just* how much she changed after meeting you. But today, I finally understand.”

“You do?” I said.

“Yes, I do.” Her eyes were firmly fixed on me. “You look a lot like *him*. Like Aina’s father,” she explained, a sad smile on her face. As she stared at me, her eyes filled with grief, I realized she must be seeing her husband in me too.

“To be honest with you, you gave me quite a shock when you walked in,” she told me. “I thought he’d finally come home. My heart almost stopped.”

“I’m sorry it was me who walked through that door, and not your husband,” I said.

“Oh, no, that’s not what I meant. I apologize for the misunderstanding. I was actually happy,” Stella explained. “You see, I’d started to forget what my husband looked like, but thanks to you, I can remember his face a little more clearly now.”

I’d never seen anything akin to a photograph in Ninoritch. If there really were no photographs or videos in this world—or anything else that might help someone to remember how people who weren’t around anymore looked—that meant the inhabitants of Ninoritch had to rely exclusively on their memories. But sadly, memories tended to grow hazy with the passage of time, which meant after a while, they’d probably end up forgetting what their loved ones looked like.

“Now that I’ve remembered his face thanks to you, I’m sure I’ll be able to find him when I cross over,” Stella asserted. “Or maybe he’ll come and find me himself. He was such a kind man, after all.”

“When you ‘cross over’? What are you talking about—”

“It’s all right,” she interrupted. “You don’t need to treat me with kid gloves.

It's my body, after all. I already know I don't have a lot of time left."

She brought her right hand up to my face, her frail arm trembling. "I can barely move my arms and legs now. I know it's only a matter of time until I'm able to see my husband again." She shook her head sadly. "My only regret is that it will mean leaving Aina all alone. I've always been afraid of what might happen to her when I pass. But now that I've met you, and seen just how happy she is around you, I'm not worried anymore."

She fixed her gaze on me once more. "Mr. Shiro, I fully understand that I'm asking a lot from you here, but I'm begging you: could you please take custody of Aina when I am gone? She's quite the crybaby, so I..."

She couldn't finish her sentence, the words choking in her throat as tears welled up in her eyes. Her arms refused to move, so she couldn't even wipe them away. Crystalline droplets started to run silently down her cheeks as she sat there on her bed, thinking about her daughter.

"Please, Mr. Shiro! My daughter..." she pleaded. "Aina..." She choked up, before trying again. "Please—ah!" She tried to force herself to get out of bed, but she overbalanced and fell.

"Careful!" I cried, catching her at the last second and cradling her in my arms. "A-Are you all right?" I asked her.

"Yes," she said with a small nod after a pause.

"Let me get you back in your bed," I said softly.

"All right."

For a few seconds, I debated with myself over what would be the best way to get her back into bed, before eventually deciding to deploy the princess carry. I placed one arm around her shoulders and the other under her knees, then lifted her up with a little "heave-ho." Just as I was about to set her down on the bed again, a thought crossed my mind.

"Excuse me, Stella. Can I touch your legs?" I asked out of the blue.

"Huh?" she replied, taken aback. "M-My legs?"

"Yes."

She didn't say anything.

"A-Ah, wait!" I suddenly realized just how wrong what I'd said had sounded. "I'm not planning to do anything weird! I'm just curious about something! I promise I don't have bad intentions!"

"Well, if you're fine with these scrawny legs of mine..." Stella said coyly, "...then you can touch them as much as you like."

She seemed to have gotten the wrong idea entirely, but at least she'd given me permission.

"Thank you," I said.

I got her to sit up in bed, then rolled her nightgown up a little until her legs were uncovered. They were really thin for a woman of her age.

"May I?" I asked.

"G-Go ahead," she said with a nod.

I calmed myself down and lightly placed my fingers on her leg. After a bit of repeated prodding—and even a few fairly strong whacks—I let out a quiet "Just as I thought" under my breath. My hypothesis had proved right.

"Um, may I ask what you mean by that? Did you, uh..." Stella murmured bashfully, her face slightly flushed. "Did you like my legs?"

It looked as if she'd misunderstood my intentions big time.

"Th-That's not what I meant!" I hurriedly tried to explain myself. "I wasn't touching your legs for *that* reason! I just had an idea what the cause of this 'Decaying Disease' might be and what kind of treatment might work on it!"

"R-Really? A treatment for the Decaying Dis—" She did a double take. "Wait, what?" She looked completely stunned and uncomprehending.

"Yes, exactly. A treatment for the Decaying Disease. I will cure your illness, Stella," I declared.

"Cure my illness?" she repeated quietly after a slight pause.

"Yes, cure it," I said resolutely. "I'll do whatever it takes."

"Are you serious? Can you really cure..." she said, before trailing off.

“Yes. I promise I’ll cure you,” I replied confidently. “My uncle used to have the same illness, except his condition was much more advanced. But he’s doing just fine now. I will cure you. You can count on me,” I said with a proud expression on my face, nodding vigorously.

The clear droplets that had been trickling down Stella’s face turned into a full-on waterfall. Tears were cascading freely down her cheeks, and she had to bite her lip in an attempt to keep her emotions in check.

“Mr. Shiro, I...” she stammered. “I...”

Her voice was barely audible, but the words she said next were crystal clear.

“I don’t want to die yet.”

She’d probably been living in despair for the longest time, and after losing every last shred of hope she had, she’d given up on life. I gently took her hand to reassure her and give her some of that hope back.

“Everything will be fine,” I told her softly. “You aren’t going to die. You’ll be able to stay here with Aina for a lot longer.”

“Mr. Shiro...”

She stared into my face, and without averting my gaze for even a second, I gave her a slight nod and repeated that everything would be fine.

Aina and Rolf picked that exact moment to return.

“Aina and Rolf are back,” Karen said as she stepped back into the house. “Are you guys—”

“Mama!” Aina called out cheerfully. “I’m home—”

“Mr. Shiro, sir, we’re back—”

Aina, Rolf, and Karen all froze as they walked into the room and were greeted with the sight of Stella sobbing as I gripped her hand tightly, her legs completely bare.

Ah, I thought. What can I say here to prove my innocence?

Chapter Sixteen: The Truth About the Illness

It had been a really arduous task trying to explain the situation to the three of them. Aina had naturally been incredibly worried about her mother when she saw her crying. Neither Karen nor Rolf had said a word, though the former had started to walk toward me with a severe look on her face, while the latter had tightened his grip on his mace. If Stella hadn't come to my rescue and explained what was going on, who knows what would have become of me? Just thinking about it made me shiver with dread. Once the misunderstanding was all cleared up, though, they thankfully all returned to their normal friendly selves, and were now more concerned about how to treat the Decaying Disease.

"Where I come from, the Decaying Disease is called 'beriberi,'" I explained.

"'Beriberi'?" they all repeated as one.

I nodded and resumed my explanation. "It's an illness a person contracts when they aren't getting enough of certain nutrients."

Humans needed different types of vitamins in order to stay healthy, and not getting enough of them often led to various illnesses. And the poster child of vitamin deficiency maladies was none other than the illness Stella was suffering from: the "Decaying Disease," otherwise known as beriberi. One of the things that told you if someone was suffering from beriberi was to give them a sharp tap below their knee to test their patellar reflex. If the person was healthy, the lower leg would reflexively kick out, but if the person was suffering from beriberi, it wouldn't. Stella's leg hadn't budged when I'd given her a swift whack below the knee, which was how I'd confirmed the illness known in this world as the "Decaying Disease" was actually beriberi. In its advanced stages, beriberi could lead to muscle paralysis and even heart failure. It was a terrible illness that led to the death of tens of thousands of people in Japan during the Taisho period, around the beginning of the twentieth century, but thankfully, treating it these days was a very simple matter. All you needed to do was up your intake of whatever particular vitamin you were lacking in. And you could get vitamin

supplements practically anywhere in Japan—pharmacies primarily, of course, but you could even pick them up at convenience stores.

“I’m just gonna head back to my shop real quick and grab some medicine for you, all right?” I said to Stella.

“Wait a minute, Shiro. Are you saying you actually have the cure for the Decaying Disease at your *store*?!” Karen said, dumbfounded. Beside her, the usually perpetually smiling Rolf had a similar expression on his face, his eyes wide.

“Mister Shiro, you have medicine that can cure mama?” Aina asked, her voice trembling. I could see tears in her eyes, as well as a faint glimmer of hope.

I crouched down and looked her in the eye. “Yeah, I do. I’m gonna go get it super quick, so can you wait here for me?”

She nodded. “Yes.”

“Good girl. I’ll be right back.”



Not long later, I was back at home. In the picture on the memorial altar, grandma was still going strong with her double peace signs, a smile plastered across her face. Vases of flowers picked by Aina stood on either side of the portrait. Ever since she’d started working for me, the little girl would pick flowers every day and give them to me when she came to work.

“‘Do whatever you can to help people in trouble.’ That’s what you always used to tell me, right, grandma?”

The first time I’d heard those words, I was only a preschooler. Grandma would always tell me the same thing: “Shiro, if someone’s in trouble and you are in a position to help them, you should always do so. If you do, then when you’re the one in trouble, they will come to your aid.” I’d only learned the saying “one good turn deserves another” several years after that.

“Watch me, grandma,” I said to her portrait. “I’m about to help someone in trouble.”

Someone was in trouble, and I was in a position to help them. Actually,

“trouble” was a light way of putting it. I could say without a hint of exaggeration that this was a matter of life and death.

“All righty, let’s do this!” I said determinedly. I took 10 silver coins out of my pouch. “Activate Equivalent Exchange skill!”

The coins disappeared in front of my eyes and were replaced by ten 10,000-yen bills. I then went off to the nearest drugstore and bought as many bottles of vitamins as I could get my hands on, tossed all of them into my inventory, and headed back to Aina’s house.

“I’m back!” I announced as I walked in. “Sorry I kept you all waiting.”

It had taken me a little while to buy the vitamins, and by the time I returned, the sun had completely set and moonlight was streaming in through the window. Everyone stared at me intently as I uncurled my hand.

“Here, Stella. Take this,” I said, taking an orange pill out of a small bottle.

“This orange thing?” Stella asked, sounding a little dubious.

“Yes. I know the color’s a little off-putting, but it’s proper medicine. If you take it, it’ll cure your illness,” I assured her.

“This little pill?” She still didn’t seem convinced.

“Yes,” I said, trying to reassure her once more, though she continued to stare at the vitamin in my hand.

All right, let me level with you here. This little pill was actually the Japanese white-collar worker’s last lifeline, taken to try to survive as their life force slowly got sucked away by their job. In other words, this was Japan’s most popular supplement: the “Chocolata BB Miracle Multivitamin & Minerals.” Just by taking one pill in the morning and one at night, you got all of the vitamins you needed for the day. A truly extraordinary product, I think you’ll agree. It could even treat canker sores almost instantly! It had a proven track record and I wouldn’t have hesitated to recommend it to anyone.

“Shiro...” Karen said slowly. “I don’t mean to cast doubt on what you just said, but...” she hesitated. “Are you sure this will work?”

As the mayor, she probably felt she had to make sure the medicine was safe

to take.

“She won’t be instantly cured after taking just one. But if she takes these pills every day, she’ll start feeling better and better, until one day, she’ll be completely cured,” I explained.

“I have to take this every day?” Stella asked, looking very worried by this bit of information.

Was the color of it really bothering her that much? Was she seriously so repulsed by the fact it was bright orange? That was what I thought at first, but...

“You said it was medicine...” she said slowly. “That means it must be quite expensive, right?”

Ah. So that was what was worrying her.

I shook my head and told her, “Please don’t worry about the price.”

“But—” she started to protest, but I didn’t let her get very far.

“Don’t worry. I’ll be collecting my payment later. Let’s see...” I said, pretending to think about a suitable price for the medicine. “I think a thousand smiles from Aina will do.”

Stella stared at me, not quite knowing what to say.

“Ever since I arrived in this town, Aina has been a huge help to me,” I explained. “Now it’s my turn to help her. So please, take the medicine.”

“Mr. Shiro...” Stella trailed off.

“Mama, listen to Mister Shiro! Take the medicine!” Aina piped up.

“Aina...” her mother said, her eyes on the little girl.

“Hurry, hurry!” Aina insisted. She fetched a cup of water for her mother.

“All right,” Stella finally agreed. “I’ll take it.”

With Aina’s help, she put the vitamin in her mouth.

“Take one pill in the morning and another one at night every day from now on, all right?” I said.

“Yes, okay,” Stella said with a nod. All eyes were on her as she swallowed

down the pill. “There,” she announced. “I took it.”

Final Chapter: Mother and Daughter

A month went by, but the day we'd all been waiting for finally came. Now that I knew Aina lived all the way out on the outskirts of Ninoritch, I'd started walking her home every day after closing up the shop. As soon as the town bell chimed to inform us that evening was here, I'd close the store and escort her home. And then, one day...

"Mama, I'm home!" Aina announced, a broad smile on her face as she opened the door.

"Welcome back, Aina," Stella greeted her.

She was standing up. She was standing up all on her own, without needing anyone to support her. She was still a little unsteady on her feet, but that was to be expected. After all, her muscle mass had most likely deteriorated after being bedridden for so long.

"Mama..." Aina gasped.

Stella chuckled. "Look, Aina! Mama's standing! Isn't that amazing?" she said, looking elated.

As for Aina, well...

"M-Mama..." the little girl stammered. "You can already..." she breathed, her face contorting. "You can already stand up?"

"I can! I really can stand up!" her mother said joyously. "I should even be able to walk soon. And it's all thanks to Mr. Shiro."

Aina hung her head as her small frame trembled. "Mama..." she said quietly. "You..." she started before pausing. "You're feeling better already?"

"Yes!" her mother said happily. "I'm feeling so good I don't even know what to do with all this energy."

"Then..." she continued. "That means I can sleep in your bed tonight, right? Just like before?"

Crystalline droplets fell to the ground, landing just in front of the little girl's feet. I instinctively reached out to rub her back, but pulled my hand away at the last moment. Oh, yeah, that's right. It wasn't my job to do that. I went over to stand next to Stella and brought my mouth close to her ear.

"Please go and reassure her, Stella," I whispered to her.

"Yes, of course," she whispered back. She leaned on me as she walked over to the little girl.

Aina was crying her eyes out. She'd spent so long living in fear that her mother could die any day, the relief of seeing her health improve to such an extent was overwhelming for the little girl. At this particular moment, Stella was the only one who could stem the flow of tears.

"You can sleep in my bed every day from now on, Aina," Stella said, wrapping her arms around her daughter in a gentle hug.

"Mama..." Aina blubbed. "Mama!"

Aina was full-on wailing by this point. She was sobbing like a little kid, her behavior in this moment worlds away from the obedient, hardworking child I knew. No, the Aina in front of me was simply an eight-year-old girl who wanted to be comforted by her mother.

"I'm so, so sorry for making you worry all this time, Aina," Stella said to the little girl. "Let's..." She paused as her own eyes filled with tears. "Let's carry on living together, hm?"

I headed outside, gently closing the door behind me. The setting sun had painted the surrounding landscape a shade of crimson. It was beautiful.

"Grandma..." I said to the air around me. "I can finally say I managed to help someone."



Epilogue

“Ah, today was a good day!”

I was relaxing in the rocking chair that I’d brought from grandma’s house and placed outside, in the large backyard behind my store. It was about six in the evening and the sun had started to set behind the mountains. I had a bottle of my favorite craft beer in my hand and was taking sips from it as I rocked back and forth in the chair.

I took another sip and let out a deep, satisfied sigh. “Being able to enjoy a beer while admiring the sunset...” I murmured. “What a lavish lifestyle I lead!”

It wasn’t long before the sun had set completely, and the pitch-black sky filled up with sparkling stars.

“That’s a sight you won’t get in Tokyo, huh?” I mused.

I munched down some potato chips and took a swig of my beer.

“It’s only been two months since I arrived here, yet so many things have happened already,” I said to myself.

Thanks to the supplements I’d given her, Stella was completely cured. Aina had informed me that they were now sleeping in the same bed every night.

“But you know, when I’m in bed and talking to mama, it’s so much fun, I can’t fall asleep!” she had told me.

She talked to me about her mother every day. She’d say stuff like, “Mister Shiro! I cooked with mama yesterday!” or, “I had a staring contest with mama, and she made this face! Look!” or even, “Mister Shiro, I went to pick flowers with mama! They’re really pretty, aren’t they?” And so on, and so forth. The little girl would talk about nothing else, which was probably proof of just how much Stella had been spoiling her daughter recently. I was incredibly happy to hear it too. Stella’s entire life seemed to revolve around her precious daughter, and Aina would do anything for her mother. I really hoped they’d be able to live happily forever.

“Come to think of it, Emille’s been really busy these past few days, hasn’t she?” I mused, changing the subject. “She had so much time on her hands when we first met.”

The “puny” little Adventurers’ Guild, the Silver Moon, had officially become part of the Fairy’s Blessing guild as their subsidiary branch in Ninoritch, and as such, the Blue Flash adventuring party now found themselves registered with the Fairy’s Blessing guild. I’d also heard that a bunch of other adventurers had gathered in Ninoritch, and they were all hard at work, exploring the large forest to the east of town. Emille had been freed from her duties as acting guildmaster and was back to being the guild’s receptionist. I’d heard she was apparently spending her days sitting and waiting for a rich adventurer to come by. I was pretty sure if any man matching that description did appear, she’d quickly start unbuttoning her shirt, just like she’d done upon our first meeting.

Oh, speaking of money, over the last two months, I’d earned myself a grand total of fifty million yen. If I kept that up for a whole year, I’d probably be able to stop working altogether by the end of it.

“Fifty million yen already...” I muttered to myself. “The day where I become a true NEET is getting close.”

“What’s getting close, Shiro?” a voice from behind me suddenly asked. I squeaked in surprise and almost fell off my chair.

“Good evening, Shiro,” the voice continued. “It’s a really calm night tonight, isn’t it?”

I turned around and saw Karen standing there.

“Oh, it’s you, Karen...” I said, letting out a sigh of relief. “You scared me. I thought my heart was about to stop altogether for a second there.”

She chuckled. “Sorry about that. I was out on my evening stroll when I heard you talking as I passed your shop. My curiosity got the better of me, so I came around to see what was going on, only to find you happily chatting away to yourself. I couldn’t help but sneak up on you and tease you a little.”

“That wasn’t very nice of you,” I said, but I didn’t really mean it. Quite the opposite, in fact. Getting a glimpse of the perpetually composed Karen’s

mischievous side was a highly enjoyable experience.

“What are you drinking?” she asked, glancing at the bottle in my hand.

“Alcohol from my home country,” I replied. “Would you like to try it?”

“Well, it would be rude of me to refuse,” she said.

I opened the cooler box next to me and grabbed another bottle from it. I removed the cap and handed it to Karen.

“Oh? The bottle’s glass? That’s quite fancy. I assume this must be quite expensive alcohol, then?” she asked, but I shook my head.

“Nope. It’s actually really cheap. Tastes great, though.”

“Well, now you’ve got me curious,” she said before taking a few sips and nodding. “Yes, that certainly is good alcohol.”

“Right? It’s my favorite,” I told her.

“Is it?” she said. “I see you have good taste when it comes to alcohol as well.”

I laughed. “You do realize that even if you flatter me, the only thing I can give you in return is more alcohol.”

“That’s quite all right,” Karen said. “Actually, allow me to shower you with more praise.”

“Go ahead. Sing the praises of the great Shiro,” I joked. “I’m actually the type of person who thrives on compliments, you know.”

“Oh, is that so? Did you want me to give you a pat on the head as well?” she teased, reaching a hand out toward my head.

“H-Hey!” I protested. “Stop that, please!”

“Why? Didn’t you say you liked being praised? Be a good boy now and let me pat your head,” she said with a big smile splashed across her face as she started stroking my hair.

I was super embarrassed, but at the same time, it did feel kind of good. How long had it been since someone last stroked my hair? I think grandma might have been the last person who’d done it.

“Shiro...” she started, still stroking my hair. “Thank you so, so much for coming to our little town. I can never thank you enough for everything you’ve done for us. And that includes saving the life of Aina’s mother. It’d be absurd to suggest I could give you any kind of ‘reward’ that will measure up to your contribution to our community, but is there anything I can do to repay you for your kindness?”

“Aw, come on now, I don’t need a reward!” I replied. “I just did what I could to help out. Besides, Stella is cured now, Aina is happy, and all the people close to her are as well. Yup, that’s reward enough for me.”

“Shiro...” Karen said. “You really don’t have an ounce of greed in you, do you?”

She had stopped stroking my hair and was staring at me, her gaze a mix of exasperation and admiration.

“That’s not true!” I protested playfully. “I’m a really greedy man. I mean, look how much I love making money.”

“You say that, but you’re so unlike all the other merchants,” Karen pointed out. “They’re much more calculating than you. I mean it. I’ve never seen or heard of a virtuous merchant before!”

“Well, there might not be any in *this* region, but I’m sure there must be at least one *somewhere*,” I suggested.

“Hm...” Karen pondered. “In front of me, perhaps?”

“Huh? Where?” I said, feigning ignorance and pretending to look behind me to find this mysterious merchant she was talking about.

Karen burst out laughing. “P-Please don’t make me laugh so much!”

She laughed for a long, long time, seemingly unable to compose herself. Seeing her in a fit of giggles set me off too.

She eventually calmed down and let out a blissful sigh. “Ah, it’s been a while since I last laughed this much.”

“‘A smile a day keeps the doctor away,’” I quoted. “Or so they say. Speaking of smiling, Aina’s been doing a lot of it recently too.”

“She has. And it’s entirely down to you. It’s not even just Aina; Emille and I have been grinning a lot too.” She smiled gently at me, then continued. “You’ve really been a huge help to so many of us. Saving people left and right...” she said, looking truly grateful. “You’re just like those heroes the minstrels are always singing about.”

“That’s...” I protested. “No, no, stop that. That’s going too far. I saw someone in trouble and I knew I could help them, so I simply lent a hand. That’s what people do—help each other—right? It’s only natural.”

“You’re true to your word,” Karen stated. “That’s your greatest strength.”

“Hm...” I said, mulling this over. “Well, you can thank my grandma for that. She’s the one who made me turn out this way.”

“Your grandmother?” she queried.

“Yeah.” I paused for a few seconds as I tried to remember what grandma used to say to me. “‘Shiro, if someone’s in trouble and you are in a position to help them, you should always do so. If you do, then when you’re the one in trouble, they will come to your aid.’ That’s what my grandma taught me.”

“Very wise words,” Karen said with a nod after a slight pause. “May I ask your grandmother’s name?”

“Of course,” I said. “She was called Arisugawa Mio.”

As soon as grandma’s name passed my lips, Karen’s expression changed to one of astonishment. “Wait, Alice Gawamio?! Shiro...” Karen said disbelievingly. “You’re the grandson of Alice the Immortal Witch?!”

“Huh?” I felt like my brain had stopped working for a few seconds until I recalled what grandma had said in her letter to me: *I have been hiding something from you all. I am actually a witch. Eighty years ago, I left my own world of Ruffaltio and came to Japan. I apologize for keeping this from you until now.*

Wait, wait, wait. Hold it right there.

“Karen...” I said, dumbfounded. “Do you know my grandma?”

She nodded. “Yes. In fact, you’d be hard-pressed to find anyone on this whole

continent that doesn't know her."

Are you kidding me? Grandma was a celebrity in her home world?

As I sat there, totally dumbstruck, Karen decided to drop a few more info bombs on me. "Well, I say that, but most people have never met her. I have, though."

"Huh?" was the only thing I could manage to utter.

"I met Alice the witch last year. Apparently, she has some sort of connection to this town, and she suddenly showed up here on the day of the harvest festival." She chuckled as if she were recalling a fond memory. "I remember her drinking merrily and dancing away."

"Last year?" I repeated.

What the heck was she talking about? Grandma went missing seven years ago! Ah, wait a minute. Maybe it was just a coincidence that this so-called "great witch" had the same name as my grand—

"Yes, last year. I still remember that day very clearly. Alice the Immortal Witch even showed me the magic sword she'd crafted by assembling star fragments: the legendary Melkipson!"

Ah, never mind. I was now absolutely certain the "Immortal Witch" she was talking about was my grandma. Why, you might ask? Well, because Mel Kipson was the name of grandma's favorite action star.

"Alice the Immortal Witch, owner of the magic sword, Melkipson..." Karen repeated. "So she's your grandmother, huh? I have to admit, I'm surprised, but at the same time, it all makes sense now. I finally understand how you can own so many items and types of medicine I've never seen before." She shrugged as if to say she really should have reached this conclusion a lot sooner. "Are you still in contact with your grandmother?"

"I actually haven't seen her in seven years. Hey, could you, uh..." I hesitated. "Do you mind just giving me a sec?"

"Hm? I mean, sure," Karen said. "What's wrong?"

"No biggie. I just need to, uh, go do something..." I said. "I'll be right back."

I stood up and strolled to the middle of the backyard. Then I took a deep breath, filling my lungs right to the brim with oxygen, and...

“What the hell?! Has grandma been alive *this whole time*?!”

Under the starry sky, my screamed words echoed through the quiet streets of Ninoritch.

Afterword

Thank you for reading *Peddler in Another World: I Can Go Home Whenever I Want!* (or *Peddler in Another World* for short). If this is your first time reading something I have written, it's nice to meet you. If you've read my previous work, hi there. It's been a while.

I'm Hiroyuki Shimotsuki, the author. I've always wanted to see the characters of this series drawn, and Takashi Iwasaki-sensei has made that possible. Dreams really do come true, huh? (*emotional face*). The cover, the frontispiece, and the illustrations dotted throughout this volume are incredibly well drawn. If you've flicked to the back to read this afterword and haven't read the main story yet, be sure to look forward to seeing them in all their glory.

This story is about a young man who learns that his late grandmother's house is connected to another world and decides to set up a business over there. Thanks to his little business venture, he will meet a lot of different people from this other world and forge deep bonds with them. The setting is pretty similar to my other series, but I tried to go for a completely different theme here. The little Aina who loves her mother; Karen the mayor, who wants her town to thrive; the unreliable Emille; and the four trustworthy members of Blue Flash... Did you all enjoy reading their tale? If you did, I'm glad to hear it! They will all be back in the next volume too, so please look forward to that.

All right, so this is probably the first you're hearing of it, but *Peddler in Another World* is actually getting a manga adaptation! (*applause*) Shizuku Akechi-sensei—who has previously worked on a spin-off manga of a very well-known series and is amazing at drawing both cute and handsome characters—will be drawing it. I'm sure you must all be looking forward to it, though I reckon I'm probably the person who's looking forward to it the most. The manga version will probably start coming out around the same time as Volume 2 of the light novel, so please be patient for a little bit longer, okay?

And now, on to the acknowledgments:

To Takashi Iwasaki-sensei, thank you for your incredible illustrations. I went as far as creating a folder for them on my cell phone, so I could look at them every day.

To my editor and the whole editorial department of HJ Bunko, I'm happy I got to work with you all again.

To my family, my friends, and my dogs, thank you for supporting me every step of the way.

To my author friends, thank you for taking time out of your day practically every day to give me advice on this series.

And finally, the biggest, fattest thank you of all goes to you, the reader, for reading up to this point!

I would also like to mention that I will be donating a portion of the royalties from this book toward helping children who are in need all around Japan. By providing them with financial and educational support, I hope I can help give them the life every child deserves. So by purchasing this book, you are also contributing to giving them that life. I think it would be nice if these children became light novel fans when they grow up.

All righty, then. See you all in the next volume!

Hiiro Shimotsuki

Bonus Short Stories

Karen, the Iron-Willed Woman

Ninoritch is a little town in a remote region of the Giruam Kingdom with roughly five hundred inhabitants, and the mayor of this tiny place is a woman named Karen Sankareka. Let's take a look at what a day in her life is like, shall we?

"All right, everyone, time to get patrolling those streets," Karen announced. "Remember, if anything happens, don't try to resolve it by yourself. Use your whistles to let the others know about the situation."

"Yes, ma'am!" the men lined up in front of Karen said in unison. They were all part of the Ninoritch Vigilante Corps, a group of brave, unmarried young men whose aim was to maintain harmony in the town. The mayor supervised their activities.

In order to survive in a remote region like this one, you needed to be healthy and hardy. Every single member of the Ninoritch Vigilante Corps was blessed with an incredible constitution, and even though they were a small group from a remote town, they were a well-oiled unit. In fact, they were almost as well-organized as the orders of knights in the royal capital.

"Don't ever act on your own," Karen continued. "Always keep in mind that your priority is to ensure our town remains a safe, harmonious place."

"Yes, ma'am!"

To the members of the Vigilante Corps, Karen was practically a goddess and her words were absolute. For that reason, people had given them a nickname that they called them behind their backs: "Karen's bodyguards." The young men of the corps devoted their lives to the beautiful and—most importantly of all—*single* mayor. They were ready to do anything and everything—literally *everything*—in their power to protect the town for their beloved Karen. And perhaps in working so closely with this bombshell of a mayor, the young men

might also use this opportunity to get closer to her and potentially have their relationship evolve into something more. In truth, that was the real reason they were all part of this group.

“All right, everyone. Let’s get to work,” Karen said.

“Yes, ma’am!” Once again, they all nodded in unison.

All of them bowed to Karen before heading out into the town, with some even going as far as kneeling in front of her to show their allegiance. There were fifty members in the Vigilante Corps—yes, that’s right: about one-tenth of the whole population of the town. Each member worked one shift every five days, which worked out to five of them working each day shift, and five working each night shift.

“Phew. They’re finally gone,” Karen said with a sigh once they’d all filed out and she was alone.

Karen had very good instincts and was a good judge of character to boot. She had immediately recognized that the young men of the Vigilante Corps had ulterior motives for joining up; they weren’t just helping her out of goodwill. She let out another sigh. She did feel like she was taking advantage of them somewhat, but it was all in the name of maintaining peace and order in Ninoritch.

Please forgive me, you guys, she inwardly apologized to them, before also heading out. It was nighttime and the only light in the otherwise pitch-black streets of Ninoritch came courtesy of the two moons in the dark sky. She felt she couldn’t just sit at home and relax while the Vigilante Corps were out there doing all the work, so she decided to first patrol around the small river where the bridge crossed it, then headed down to the town hall to patrol around there. She stopped when she got to the marketplace. Unsurprisingly, there wasn’t a single shop open this late at night, and she strolled across the empty marketplace until she got to one particular shop, which she paused in front of. The sign on the building read “Shiro’s Shop.”

“He’s probably asleep by now, huh?” Karen wondered aloud as she peered up at the store’s second-floor windows. As it happens, the building used to belong to Karen’s family, and she was presently letting Shiro use it for his business

venture. “Ah, I should go,” she said to herself. “If someone catches me lurking around out here, they’ll get the wrong idea entirely.”

Shiro’s little employee, Aina, already teased Karen whenever she saw her, saying stuff like “Shiro and Karen should get married!” and all that jazz. If someone were to see her outside his place this late at night...

“I-I-I-I didn’t come here to sneak into Shiro’s bedroom!” Karen suddenly blurted out in a panic before spinning on her heels with the intention of leaving. But something caught her attention. “Hm, what’s that?” she said, stopping in her tracks.

She stood there for a moment, not making a single sound, and listened carefully. Yup, she’d been right. A mischievous smile crept across her face and she started walking around to the shop’s backyard, treading as quietly as she could. And when she got there, there he was. She found Shiro sitting on a chair in the middle of the backyard, his gaze firmly fixed on the two moons shining brightly overhead.

“Man, nothing beats a good beer, does it?” she heard him say to himself.

It seemed as though he was enjoying a nice evening drink outside. There were a few dishes on a little table next to him, as well as a glass bottle of golden-colored alcohol. Shiro had actually let her try this alcoholic drink once before. It was apparently called “beer” and it was much better than the ale the residents of Ninoritch liked to drink.

She swallowed audibly, her throat starting to feel a little parched. “No, I can’t,” she chided herself, trying to shake off the temptation to go join him. “I’m in the middle of a patrol right now. It would set a very bad example to the Vigilante Corps if I started drinking while I was on duty.”

Damn you, Shiro! she thought to herself. *If you’re going to have a drinking session, the least you could do is invite me!*

Karen spun on her heels and begrudgingly left the backyard of the shop, a pout on her lips. She was, after all, a very responsible mayor.

Kilpha and the Cat Brush

The cat-sith Kilpha was a member of the Blue Flash adventuring party. Her hair and ears were silver-colored, and naturally, so too was her pride and joy: her tail. She often behaved artlessly, was always brimming with curiosity, and was by and large a free spirit. If she spotted something that piqued her interest, she would drop whatever it was she was doing and wander off on her own to check it out. Needless to say, more often than not, this trait had gotten her into trouble.

But that was Kilpha for you. She was the Blue Flash's scout, which was a very important role in any adventuring party. Her main duty was to lead the way whenever the party was exploring unfamiliar forests or dungeons. This required her to constantly be keeping an eye out for potential threats, as well as using her ears and nose to identify anything that might spell danger for the party. Because of this, she would invariably be the first one to notice monsters approaching. Another of her duties was to watch out for traps. Naturally, if she did ever stumble across a trap, she was also expected to disarm it. Even in battle, she often took the lead, her weapon quick to her hand. All in all, one might say she had the most important role in the party. Or well, at least that's what *she* would claim.

At this particular moment, Kilpha wasn't actually on an adventure. She was on cloud nine.

She purred, then let out a satisfied "Me-ow!" Get it? 'Cause she's a cat.

She was lying on her front on the bed, her face red and her mouth drooping slightly as her slim, shapely body writhed about on the plush throws. She might even have been drooling.

A man behind her chuckled. "How is it, Kilpha? It feels good, right?"

"Hmmm-meow," she purred. "Shiro... More..."

"Hm? What did you say?" he replied. "Say it again, but louder this time."

"Y-You're such a big meanie, meow!" Kilpha pouted.

"I see. So does that mean I should stop, then?"

"N-No, wait! M-More! I want you to do it some more, meow," she pleaded and purred at the same time.

“That’s a good girl. As a reward for your efforts, I’ll keep going,” Shiro said with a teasing smirk on his face. “You ready?” he asked.

“Y-Yeah...” Kilpha said with a shy nod.

“All righty. I won’t hold back, then...” Shiro announced. “Here we go!”

Shiro used the thing he was holding in his hand on Kilpha. The cat-sith immediately let out a loud mewl.

“I’m not done yet!” Shiro called out to her.

“Hmmm-meow! Meow!”

“Take it!”

“Meooooooooow!”

Shiro let out a sigh and relaxed. “How was it, Kilpha?”

It took the cat-sith a moment to catch her breath. “That felt...”—she gasped for air—“...very good,” Kilpha panted, which earned her a chuckle from Shiro.

“Seems I managed to satisfy you, huh?” he said proudly as he wiped the sweat from his brow.

So what *was* this mysterious item he’d been using on Kilpha, you might ask?

“It felt so good...” Kilpha repeated. “This ‘pin brush’ thing is awesome.”

“Didn’t I tell you it was?” Shiro beamed.

It was a pin brush, a brush used for grooming pets that had metal pins with rounded ends in order to protect the skin. It was very good at detangling hair and getting rid of knots, and it was especially recommended for use on long-haired pets, or even short-haired pets that had lots and lots of hair. And you could even treat your pet to a little massage by giving it gentle taps with the brush while grooming it.

Shiro had been intrigued by something for the longest time, and that something was Kilpha’s fluffy tail and the fact it had never been properly groomed. He’d decided he had to do something about that, so he’d gone to a pet shop and explained what he was looking for to the store clerk. After some deliberation, Shiro had bought a brush for long-haired pets, and once he’d

managed to convince Kilpha to let him try it on her, he'd finally given her tail a proper brushing. As for what happened next—well, you saw that for yourself.

After her tail had been thoroughly brushed, Kilpha stretched out on the bed, a blissful smile plastered across her face. She'd always been very proud of her tail and had put a lot of effort into taking care of it, but now that Shiro had brushed it, it was much fluffier than it had ever been. How did he *do* that?!

"Hmmm-meow!" she purred again. She was very happy. One might even say she was the happiest cat-sith in the world. That wasn't the end of it, though.

"Next, we're gonna use this little guy," Shiro said as he took out another brush, an incredibly smug look on his face.

"What's that?" Kilpha asked in some confusion.

"This is called a 'bristle brush,' and you use it to finish up the grooming," he told her.

Bristle brushes were made of boar hair, and as such, contained a certain amount of moisture and oils. This meant less static electricity was produced when brushing your pet's hair, which made it a very easy-to-use brush.

"If you use this once you're all done brushing your tail, it makes the hair even smoother," Shiro explained.

Gulp. Kilpha swallowed audibly. She couldn't *not* try it after Shiro had said that to her!

"What do you think, Kilpha? Wanna try it?"

Of course, her answer couldn't be anything other than "Yes." And so...

"It's so soft! It's *insanely* soft!" Kilpha cried. Her tail was now much softer than any cat-sith's had ever been. "Ha ha ha! Ha ha ha!"

And Shiro, who had always dreamt of touching Kilpha's tail, was finally getting to do so, and he brushed it until it was all soft and fluffy.

Nesca and the Chocolate

Nesca was a highly-skilled half-elf who traveled with the Blue Flash

adventuring party. The elven blood that coursed through her veins made her magic abilities much stronger than what a regular person was capable of. Up until about six months ago, she had been enrolled in the Magic Academy, and it almost goes without saying that she'd always gotten perfect grades, much to the envy of the other students. Over the years, she'd gotten countless offers from rulers of other countries for her to become their court magician, but she'd turned them all down. One might wonder why a young woman with such a fantastic future ahead of her would choose to become an adventurer of all things. Well, the answer to that was quite simple.

"I'm hungry."

It's because Nesca was very lazy. This trait also translated into her daily life, as well as her actions and her speech. Half-elves had a long life expectancy, though not quite as long as pure-blood elves. Her laziness could well have been in her genes. But that was Nesca for you.

At this particular moment, Nesca wasn't actually on an adventure. She was on cloud nine.

"Thank you so much for your help today, Nesca. Here. Have as much as you want," Shiro said as he put a plate full of sweet snacks he had said were called "chocolates" on the table in front of her. As soon as her eyes landed on the snacks, Nesca started to drool.

Shiro had asked her to tell him about the other big nations and cities in Ruffaltio, and as Nesca didn't really have anything better to do, she had obliged. She'd told him the history of her home country, the elven customs her mother had taught her about, and the many different places she had visited with her companions. All in all, she'd spoken quite a bit for someone as lazy as her.

Nesca also tended to speak pretty slowly. Most people got annoyed with her because of it, and either urged her to speed up or ended up cutting her off mid-sentence. But Shiro wasn't like that.

"Ah, I see. That's amazing! Could you tell me more?" he said with a serious expression on his face.

Unlike most people she had met in her life up to this point, Shiro never once asked her to speak faster or cut across her while she was still talking. Instead,

he listened intently to what she had to say. It had been such a long time since she'd met someone like that—well, if you discount her Blue Flash companions, of course. She knew he was serious about taking all of this information onboard, so she felt she had to properly teach him about the world. She still spoke as slowly as she always did, but for once, it was possible to hear the passion in her voice.

They'd started their conversation a little before noon, and before they knew it, it was nighttime. By this point, she was hungry and she'd pretty much told him everything she knew, so she decided it was time to go. But just as she was about to stand up...

"Is this all chocolate?" she asked slowly.

"Yup, it is."

Shiro had brought her chocolate. A *lot* of chocolate. The chocolate Shiro had given her before was still living rent-free in her head. In her very soul, even.

"Is that for me?" she asked.

Shiro nodded. "Yeah. It's a little gift to show my appreciation to you for being such a good teacher. You can take it all home with you if you want."

All of it?! Nesca's gaze shifted to the giant pile of chocolate, a surprised expression on her face.

"You mean I can eat them?"

"Of course you can. Ah, these ones are my favorites," he said, pointing to one of the chocolates. "It's chocolate sandwiched between two cookies."

"Between two cookies?" she repeated.

Shiro nodded. "Yup, between two cookies."

Gulp.

She'd eaten cookies before. They were sweet, baked treats made of wheat, and she remembered Raiya buying her some just after she'd decided to become an adventurer. Because they were treats, they were obviously quite expensive, and when she'd found that out, she'd immediately understood Raiya's intentions. He had gone out of his way to buy her cookies to try and entice her

into joining his adventuring party.

“I want one,” Nesca mumbled.

“Sure thing. Here you go,” Shiro said as he ripped open the packaging and took out the chocolatey snack. He handed it to Nesca, and she brought it up to her mouth. She munched on the snack and her immediate reaction was one of wonder.

She looked up at her benefactor. “Shiro, I want more.”

It seemed the usually lazy and slow-paced Nesca was much faster than anyone at stuffing her face with chocolate.

The Candy Bottle

It had been one month since Aina had started working at Shiro’s shop, and the little girl was extremely happy, even if she *was* a little rushed off her feet.

“That was probably our last customer of the day,” Shiro said. “It’s a bit on the early side, but let’s call it a day and close up, shall we? Aina, can you bring in the sandwich board, please?”

“Okay!”

She went outside, picked up the A-frame sandwich board—which Aina had been told was also called a “blackboard”—that was in front of the store, and carried it inside. Shiro used the blackboard to tell his customers what his recommended products of the day were. It was Aina’s job to write on the board using this weird little stick Shiro had told her was called “chalk.” Why was it her job specifically, you might ask? The reason for that was quite simple: her handwriting was much prettier than Shiro’s.

“I brought the sign inside, Mister Shiro,” Aina announced.

“Thanks. I’m still counting up how much we made today. Could I ask you to tidy up the store for me?” Shiro said, looking up from the piles of copper and silver coins he was counting.

“Sure thing!”

Aina took out a broom and rolled up her sleeves. Ninoritch was surrounded by a forest and several fields, which meant no matter how often you swept and cleaned, dust piled up in no time. On top of that, most of Shiro's customers were adventurers and their boots were always dirty. Sometimes, they'd even wander into the store with their boots caked in mud and leave muddy footprints all over the place.

"All righty..." the little girl said, sweeping the dust on the floor into a dustpan before wandering around to a trash can behind the shop, where she emptied the load. Once she'd tipped all the dust and dirt into the bin, she let out a little "phew." She had worked really hard that day. Feeling extremely proud of herself, she headed back into the shop.

"Mister Shiro, I'm done—" she started, but immediately stopped when her eyes landed on *something*.

There was a glass bottle on the counter that hadn't been there when she'd left the room. She unconsciously gasped a little "wow," which was understandable as Aina was only eight years old. After all, any little girl her age would have had that exact same reaction upon seeing a bottle full of candies that looked like precious gems.

"One, two, three, four..."

Shiro was so busy counting up the silver coins, he hadn't even noticed Aina had come back in. She decided she'd keep quiet so that she didn't distract him, and she didn't utter a single word as her eyes remained firmly fixed on the bottle full of candy.

What are these pretty stones? Could they be precious gems? Mister Shiro is rich, after all...

She felt her heart beating faster and faster. The gems in the bottle were all kinds of colors: red, yellow, green, and even purple. And there were so many of them, the bottle was filled almost to the top.

"All righty, that's it for the silver coins," Shiro declared. "Now on to the copper coins. One, two, three, four..."

"One, two, three, four..."

Just as Shiro launched into counting the copper coins, Aina was doing the exact same thing with the candies in the bottle—as quietly as possible, of course. When she got to 24, she realized she’d made a mistake and started over. Then, she made a mistake at 37 and had to start over again. *All right*, she thought. *This time, I’m gonna get it right.*

Her breathing became a little erratic as she started counting up the candies for a third time. She’d made it to 52 when Shiro suddenly let out a loud “whew.”

“Finally done!” he sighed. “Today’s sales were pretty good.” He paused and turned around. “Uh, Aina? Are you all right?” he asked the little girl, his head tilted to one side as he gazed curiously at her. But the little girl was still staring intently at the candies and it seemed as though she hadn’t heard him.

“Hm?” he wondered aloud, following Aina’s gaze. “Ah! I see now. Aina, are you curious about these?” he asked the little girl, reaching for the glass bottle.

His reason for bringing the candy bottle here in the first place was because he was looking at potentially selling it in his store.

“What are they, Mister Shiro? Those thingies inside, I mean...” Aina said, a serious look on her face. “Are they precious gems?”

Shiro simply grinned at her and opened the bottle. “Which color do you like the best?”

“Huh?” the confused little girl said. “Uh, r-red!”

“Okay! Strawberry it is. Here you go,” Shiro said, handing Aina a red “precious gem.”

All the little girl could do was let out a confused “Huh?” as she stared blankly at the little stone.

“They’re called ‘candies.’ They’re sweet snacks,” Shiro explained. “Go on, try eating it,” he said as he took a yellow precious gem—a “candy”—out of the bottle and popped it into his mouth. “Okay?” he said, and Aina nodded.

Was it even possible for snacks to look like gems? Aina was having a hard time believing it, but she loved Shiro and trusted him implicitly. She brought the little

red gem in her hand up to her mouth, and when it hit her tongue, a single thought shot through her mind: *This tastes like happiness.*

“What do you think? Is it good?” Shiro asked. “I was thinking I might start selling them here too, but what do you think? Will people like them?”

Aina didn’t answer.

“Hm? Aina?”

Still no answer.

“Hey, Aina, are you listening?”

They really are precious gems, Aina thought, her mouth still filled with the taste of happiness.



Shiro Amata

A young man who used to work at a company with a toxic work culture. After realizing his home is connected to another world, he decides to set up a business there.

Kilpha

A cat-sith adventurer and ranger.

Aina

The first person Shiro meets when he arrives in the other world. An eight-year-old girl who loves her mother very much.



Karen

The beautiful mayor of the small town of Ninoritch. Provides Shiro with a store where he can sell his rare items.

Nesca

A half-elf mage. Has a weakness for chocolate.

Stella

Aina's mother. Appears to be quite sickly. Twenty-six years of age.





Nesca

Kilpha

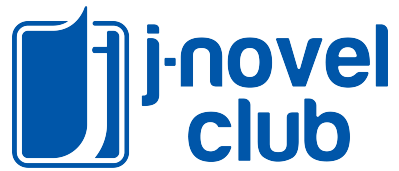
The
Adventuring
Party

Blue Flash

A group of adventurers
who accompany Shiro
on an adventure.
It has four members:
Raiya, Rolf, Kilpha,
and Nesca.

Rolf

Raiya



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Peddler in Another World: I Can Go Back Whenever I Want! Volume 1

by Takashi Iwasaki

Translated by Bérénice Vourdon Edited by SMR

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